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2. Under the “Search” tab, type “using the search function” or “search PDX” to access directions on using Adobe Reader’s advanced search capabilities. See especially, “Searching across multiple Adobe PDF documents” or “Searching all Adobe PDF files in a specific location” (you may have to scroll down) to search multiple volumes of the Commentary and “Searching Adobe PDF index files” to take advantage of the increased speed of searches using .PDX files.

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THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE
MICAH—MALACHI

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ADVANCE PRAISE

Jim Nogalski has worked longer and deeper on the “Minor Prophets” than anyone else among us. He has brought to his study energy, attentiveness, and expertise. A trail-blazer in canonical interpretation, here he uses his sense of the final form of the text as a basis for a rich, reliable, and probing commentary. He shows how these mostly neglected “books” matter decisively for the full range of biblical faith.

—*Walter Brueggemann*
Columbia Theological Seminary

A notable achievement! At once both sober and daring, Nogalski’s commentary builds upon scholarly work of the past thirty years in order to treat the Minor Prophets as a unified corpus, a single literary work, which is how they were once understood and transmitted within Judaism and Christianity. But he also reorients and advances the discussion in the process, not least by patiently bringing the Book of the Twelve into productive theological conversation with pressing issues of our day.

—*Stephen B. Chapman*
Associate Professor of Old Testament
Duke University

Between his two-volume dissertation in 1993 and several other studies over the last twenty years, James Nogalski has achieved a breakthrough in the understanding of the Book of the Twelve as a redactional unit. Now he provides a commentary from this new perspective, one filled with exciting new insights: how the different writings of the Twelve mutually expand, enhance, and counter-balance each other to deliver a full witness to the unfolding history of God's prophetic word.

Intertextual references that were noticed long before now gain new significance. Moreover, many new such references are discovered. Verses that seemed out of place within their context now gain importance for understanding the whole when they are placed in the global narrative framework of the Twelve. Nogalski is very careful and insightful in his analysis. He puts every text within its original historical setting and provides necessary background from Ancient Near Eastern parallels. He represents scholarly debates in a well-balanced manner, offering challenging guidance to the modern community of faith in a hermeneutically sensible way. This is a masterful commentary by an eminent expert in the field. I highly recommend it!

—Aaron Schart
*Professor of Old and New Testaments
The Institute for Protestant Theology
University of Duisburg-Essen*

CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S PREFACE	xv
SERIES PREFACE	xvii
HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY	xxi
INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE	489
BIBLIOGRAPHY	507

MICAH

1	Introduction to the Book of Micah		511
2	YHWH Judges Samaria and Jerusalem	Micah 1:1-16	523
3	Confrontation, Accusation, and Promise	Micah 2:1-13	535
4	The Failure of Rulers, Prophets, and Priests	Micah 3:1-12	545
5	What the Future Holds	Micah 4:1-5:15 (MT 4:1-5:14)	553
6	Trial, Verdict, and Response	Micah 6:1-7:7	571
7	Call for a Reprieve as in the Days of Old	Micah 7:8-20	585
	Select Bibliography for Micah		597

NAHUM

	Introduction to the Book of Nahum		601
1	Cosmic Justice and Nineveh's Fate	Nahum 1:1-2:2	609
2	Taunting a Fallen Superpower	Nahum 2:3-3:19	623
	Select Bibliography for Nahum		641

HABAKKUK

	Introduction to the Book of Habakkuk		645
1	Theodicy and Judgment	Habakkuk 1:1-2:20	657
2	Theophany and Defeat of Chaos	Habakkuk 3:1-19	679
	Select Bibliography for Habakkuk		693

ZEPHANIAH

	Introduction to the Book of Zephaniah		697
1	Destruction of Jerusalem and the Day of YHWH	Zephaniah 1:1–2:3	711
2	Judgment on Foreign Nations and Judah	Zephaniah 2:4–3:8	729
3	Restoration of the Nations and Judah	Zephaniah 3:9-20	743
	Select Bibliography for Zephaniah		757

HAGGAI

	Introduction to the Book of Haggai		761
1	A Charge to Build and a Report of the Response	Haggai 1:1-15a	771
2	An Exhortation and Promise for the Future	Haggai 1:15b–2:9	781
3	Holiness, Obedience, and Blessing	Haggai 2:10-19	789
4	Unfulfilled Political Prophecy of Hope	Haggai 2:20-23	795
	Select Bibliography for Haggai		801

ZECHARIAH

	Introduction to the Book of Zechariah		805
1	A Sermon Report of the People's Repentance	Zechariah 1:1-6	823
2	The Night Visions of Zechariah	Zechariah 1:7–6:15	827
3	The “Man” among the Myrtles	Zechariah 1:7-17	829
4	The Four Horns	Zechariah 1:18-21	833
		(MT 2:1-4)	
5	The “Man” with the Measuring Line	Zechariah 2:1-13	837
		(MT 2:5-17)	
6	Joshua the High Priest	Zechariah 3:1-10	845
7	Zerubbabel, the Lampstand, and the Olive Trees	Zechariah 4:1-14	853
8	A Flying Scroll	Zechariah 5:1-4	863
9	The Floating Basket	Zechariah 5:5-11	869
10	Horses, Chariots, and Oracles	Zechariah 6:1-15	875
11	Sayings for the Delegation from Bethel	Zechariah 7:1–8:23	885
12	YHWH Defends the Territory	Zechariah 9:1-17	903
13	Reconstituting Judah and Israel	Zechariah 10:1–11:3	915
14	The Enigmatic Shepherds	Zechariah 11:4-17	929
15	Eschatological Victory and Mourning	Zechariah 12:1-14	943
16	Cleansing, Judging, Delivering	Zechariah 13:1-9	959

17	The Day of YHWH Revisited	Zechariah 14:1-21	969
	Select Bibliography for Zechariah		987

MALACHI

	Introduction to the Book of Malachi		991
1	Three Disputations on Election	Malachi 1:1–2:16	1009
2	Failure of the Priests	Malachi 1:6–2:9	1017
3	Infidelity of Judah	Malachi 2:10-16	1033
4	The Coming Day of YHWH	Malachi 2:17–4:6	1047
	Select Bibliography for Malachi		1079

INDEX OF MODERN AUTHORS	1081
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR THE INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE	1083
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR MICAH	1085
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR NAHUM	1087
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR HABAKKUK	1089
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR ZEPHANIAH	1091
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR HAGGAI	1093
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR ZECHARIAH	1095
INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR MALACHI	1099
INDEX OF SIDEBARS AND ILLUSTRATIONS	1101
INDEX OF TOPICS	1005

DEDICATION

To Melanie, Megan, and Toni;
the women who make my life meaningful.



ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

The Old Testament

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalms (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

The Apocrypha

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–4 Maccabees	1–4 Macc

The New Testament

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

*	A standard symbol in redactional studies signaling “part of the verse or passage.” Details of specific portion of the verse represented by the * are treated in the commentary proper
1cp	first common plural
1cs	first common singular
2fs	second person feminine, singular
2ms	second person masculine, singular
2mp	second person masculine, plural
3mp	third person masculine, plural
AD	<i>Anno Domini</i> (“in the year of the Lord”) (also commonly referred to as CE = the Common Era)
BC	Before Christ (also commonly referred to as BCE = Before the Common Era)
C.	century
c.	<i>circa</i> (around “that time”)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
ch., chs.	chapter, chapters
d.	died
ed.	edition or edited by or editor
eds.	editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
f./ff.	and the following one(s)
gen. ed.	general editor
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
lit.	literally
MT	Masoretic Text
n.d.	no date
rev. and exp. ed.	revised and expanded edition
sg.	singular
trans.	translated by or translator(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)
v., vv.	verse, verses

Selected additional written works cited by abbreviations include the following. A complete listing of abbreviations can be referenced in *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1999):

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HAL	<i>Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
KJV	King James Version
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint = Greek Translation of Hebrew Bible
MDB	<i>Mercer Dictionary of the Bible</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OGIS	<i>Orientis graeci inscriptiones selectae</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PRSt	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
RevExp	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLSP	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SP	Sacra pagina
TEV	Today's English Version
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

To borrow the words of Malachi, this commentary has become my own “book of remembrance.” Prophetic books are often characterized as focusing upon the enemies, and some might wonder, in the application of these texts, who the enemies are today. But this commentary, like the prophetic books themselves, was composed for the faithful, not the hostile.

My teachers gave me more than facts. Each taught me many things in the classroom, but they impressed me more as I learned about them outside the classroom. Karen Joines showed me what it means, and what it can cost, to think outside the box. Page Kelley showed me how teaching is as much about investing in the lives of students as it is in conveying information. J. J. Owens taught me how to love learning and started my interest in the Book of the Twelve. Hans Mallau taught me that patience and passion are not mutually exclusive. Odil Hannes Steck taught me to love the details and the importance of method. These teachers changed my life in ways I can never repay.

My pastors have served as models of people who genuinely want to teach as they preach. I thought of them frequently as I tried to connect prophetic texts to the life of the community today. These pastors did not always know that I was watching them for ideas and inspiration because I was not always in the pew of their churches weekly. Diane Pomeroy and Dorisanne Cooper have led their churches to think more deeply about what it means to be a community of believers committed to social justice. Marvin Wiley, Clinton Feemster, and James Smith taught me about what it means to lead African-American communities in a complex world. Les Holland and Tony Tench taught me to stay committed and engaged in the life of the congregation.

My colleagues and my students have given me encouragement at many points. Several groups of students got more than they bargained for as they came along for the ride while I wrote sections of this commentary; they took classes on prophetic books about which I was writing. I thank them for their patience and their encouragement. Gerald L. Keown has been a great friend and mentor. He has listened patiently as some of my ideas took shape, and his life has had a profound impact upon mine. Conversation partners have been many

through the years, but none have had a more sustained influence than the friendship and professional engagement of the core of scholars who have been exploring the Book of the Twelve in the Society of Biblical Literature since 1993. Two of these, in particular, I need to mention by name: Paul Redditt and Aaron Schart. They have pushed me, encouraged me, and shared the same journey on trying to understand how the Book of the Twelve came to be. Finally, I want to express sincere gratitude to Roy Garton, to Anna Sieges, and to the Religion Department of Baylor University for helping bring this work to a close. Baylor has provided me with time to write as well as students to teach. Roy Garton's careful reading of this manuscript eliminated dozens of errors, provided fresh insight, and helped me clarify my thoughts. Anna Sieges helped to finalize the manuscript and prepare the indexes. Her positive attitude helped move the project along in a timely manner.

My family has been patient with me during the many long hours of work on this commentary. My daughters, Megan and Toni, remind me what is at stake in trying to think about the big issues for this generation. My wife, Melanie, has been on this journey from the beginning. She has encouraged me beyond measure. She has listened to my thoughts and provided feedback all along the way. She has given me ideas and wisely kept me from using others. She has always been my partner in crime, but her ability to see people for who they are and who they can become has provided me with hope and gratitude time and again.

Finally, I want to thank my editors, Sam Balentine and Paul Redditt, whose careful reading of the manuscript has added immeasurably to its clarity. Sam's patient prodding helped move the commentary along even while demanding I take the time necessary to produce a volume that deals with roughly a third of the number of "books" in the Old Testament. The staff members at Smyth & Helwys also deserve recognition for the valuable assistance they provide to this volume and to this entire series. A great deal of credit goes to Scott Nash, Keith Gammons, Leslie Andres, and others whose careful reading caught numerous errors, made probing suggestions, and generally improved the finished product in ways that are not apparent to the readers. None of us realized what a daunting task this would be when we began.

James D. Nogalski
April 2011

SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. This commentary series incorporates works of fine art in an accurate and scholarly manner, yet the format remains "user-friendly." An important facet is the presentation and explanation of images of art, which interpret the biblical material or illustrate how the biblical material has been understood and interpreted in the past. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* addresses Christians and the larger church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities are reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular “confession of faith” guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation, not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that

focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*.

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

The Editors

HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

Basic Design of the Volumes

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

Commentary and Connections

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the main focus

of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

Sidebars

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* provides a unique hyper-link format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars, which provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.



Alpha & Omega Language

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All non-English terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.



Culture/Context

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, or economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.



Interpretation

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illuminates the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.



Additional Resources Study

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, websites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

Additional Features

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a list of abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* can regularly visit the Internet support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at **www.helwys.com/commentary**.

Several thorough indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These indexes include:

- An *Index of Sidebars* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- An *Index of Scriptures* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- An *Index of Topics* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- An *Index of Modern Authors* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

Over the last thirty years, scholars have begun to explore the implications of an ancient Jewish and Christian tradition that referred to the “Minor Prophets” as “the Twelve,” “the Twelve Prophets,” or the “Book of the Twelve.” Scholarly work on the Book of the Twelve in the last quarter century has focused on two issues in particular: (1) developing models regarding how the Book of the Twelve came to be recorded on a single scroll and (2) isolating unifying elements that transcend the individual writings (including catchwords, themes, and motifs) and take on new significance when the Book of the Twelve becomes a single collection rather than twelve distinct writings. An overview of the ancient traditions concerning the Book of the Twelve will lay the foundation for understanding these recent developments.

Historical Traditions

Ancient traditions referred to the scroll upon which Hosea–Malachi were transmitted as one of the four scrolls containing the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve). These four prophetic scrolls, along with the four Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) formed the *Nebi'im*, the prophetic writings in the Hebrew canon. In terms of the content and significance of these ancient traditions, the implications become clear: by 200 BCE the Twelve was written on a single scroll and, significantly, counted as a single book.

The earliest reference to the Twelve Prophets as a corpus appears in Sirach, a book of the Apocrypha composed around 180 BCE and translated by his grandson who also added a prologue to the beginning. Both this prologue and the end of Sirach contain points of reference for understanding the development of the Hebrew canon. The prologue begins, “many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them” Despite a few recent objections, this statement has been interpreted as a sign of a developing sense of canon in the early second century BCE, which recognized both the Torah (Law) and the *Nebi'im* (Prophets) as two groups of writings that held special signif-

icance for the Jewish community.¹ At the end of Sirach (44–49), one finds an extended poetic composition recounting the exploits of the ancestors whose stories appear in the biblical narratives. Within this poetic material, the author refers to the two heroic kings of Judah who saved Jerusalem (Hezekiah in 48:17–22 and Josiah in 49:1–3) followed by references to prophets in the Nebi'im. The recollections of Hezekiah are followed by a passage on the prophet Isaiah (48:23–25) while the references to Josiah are followed by references to Jeremiah (49:6–7), Ezekiel (49:8), and the bones of the Twelve Prophets (49:10) who comforted the people and gave them hope. Clearly, this section of the Hymn of the Fathers refers to the canonical books, and does so in the order in which they would come to be transmitted.

Two writings from the first century CE confirm that the Book of the Twelve was counted as one book. Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1.40) and 4 Ezra 14 refer to the number of canonical writings as 22 and 24 respectively. These numbers seem odd to modern readers who think of 39 Old Testament books, but when one realizes that prior to the Middle Ages Jewish tradition did not subdivide Samuel, Kings, or Chronicles into two books, and that it counted the Book of the Twelve as one book, then one actually can understand these numbers as close to the current number of writings in the canon.²

Jewish traditions also presume the transmission of a unified corpus of the Twelve. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 13b–15a treats the Twelve collectively (14b) in terms of its order in the Nebi'im. It also allows fewer lines between the writings of the Book of the Twelve than between other books (13a). The Masoretic notes lining the margin of the Leningrad Codex, which forms the basis of most printed Hebrew Bibles because it represents the oldest complete manuscript, also testifies to the treatment of the Book of the Twelve as a single corpus. The end of Malachi contains Masoretic notes regarding the total number of verses in the Twelve, and Micah 3:12 contains a note in the margin designating this verse as the midpoint of the Twelve.

Jerome's (347–420 CE) Prologue to the Twelve Prophets in the Vulgate references the tradition that "the Twelve is one book."³ Further, he also reports a hermeneutic for reading the Twelve when he indicates that the six undated writings should be read as coming from the time of the last king mentioned. One can surmise with some level of probability that Jerome was reporting traditions at

this point that he had learned from the rabbis who taught him Hebrew.

Jerome's contemporary, Augustine (354–430 CE), by contrast, had more effect on Christianity's relegation of the Book of the Twelve to the margins of prophetic literature. His reference to the collection as the Minor Prophets emphasized the smaller size of the individual writings, which likely had the unintended consequence of lessening their significance.

The implications for this brief overview are clear. Both Jewish and Christian traditions from 200 BCE to the Middle Ages indicate that the Twelve Prophets were considered as a single collection of prophetic writings that were counted as a single book. Jerome, probably reflecting Jewish tradition, implies that this book should also be read sequentially. Unfortunately, neither Christian nor Jewish hermeneutical practices of the time dealt much with reading prophetic books as books, so evidence for doing as Jerome suggests rarely appears.⁴

The Sequence of the Writings

While the continuing transmission of the Twelve Prophets on a single scroll indicates the collection had an established identity as a group by the beginning of the second century BCE, the order in which these writings appear within the corpus is not completely uniform. Two sequences have wide attestation, that of the MT and several strands of the LXX.⁵ The order of the first six writings in the MT and the LXX varies, though the last six appear in precisely the same order. [MT and LXX Orders] Substantial, though not universal, agreement exists that the MT reflects the original order of the writings.⁶ Two reasons account for this opinion. First, elsewhere, the LXX reorders other books according to a sense of chronology. For example, Ruth, Chronicles,

MT and LXX Orders



The order of the first six writings of the Book of the Twelve differs between the Masoretic Text and the primary order attested in the Septuagint (LXX):

When considered from the question of priority, the likelihood is that the LXX order derives from a decision to change the MT order. The LXX elsewhere reflects the rearrangement of books by placing them in their "historical" location (e.g., moving Ruth so it appears after Judges rather than near the end of the canon in the MT order). By simply bringing the three eighth-century prophets (Hosea, Amos, and Micah) together, and keeping them in the same order, one can easily see that the other three (undated) writings that follow still reflect the MT order of Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah.

MT	LXX
Hosea*	Hosea*
Joel	Amos*
Amos*	Micah*
Obadiah	Joel
Jonah	Obadiah
Micah*	Jonah

* Superscriptions mention eighth-century kings

Ezra, and Nehemiah all appear among the Writings (*Ketubim*) in the Hebrew canon, but are moved to different locations in the LXX. Ruth is placed after Judges because Ruth 1:1 sets the book “in the time when the Judges judged.” Chronicles essentially covers the same material as Samuel and Kings, so Chronicles is placed after Kings. Ezra and Nehemiah preceded Chronicles in the *Ketubim*, but they are placed after Chronicles in the LXX because they pick up where Chronicles ends.

Second, given this tendency, the LXX can be simply explained as deriving from the MT order. Three writings in the Book of the Twelve contain references to eighth-century kings (Hosea, Amos, Micah). In the MT, these three writings are separated, but in the LXX, they appear adjacent to one another (presumably they were rearranged because of their overlapping chronology), but otherwise Hosea, Amos, and Micah appear in the same sequence as in the MT. Further, the other three writings that now appear sequentially in the LXX (Joel, Obadiah, Jonah) still appear in the same order as they did in the MT. For these reasons, it appears far more likely that the LXX order derives from the MT than the other way around.

Additionally, catchword connections between the writings of the Book of the Twelve appear far more prominently in the MT.⁷ Quite consistently, concluding passages in the writings comprising the Book of the Twelve exhibit significant clusters of words that reappear at the beginning of the next writing in ways that suggest these catchword connections were heightened and/or created by editing one book in light of another. The effect of these catchwords serves as an invitation to read the two passages, and the two writings, in tandem with one another. This third reason, then, leads to a discussion of extensive scholarly treatments in the last thirty years that finally began to take seriously the implications of reading the Book of the Twelve as a single corpus rather than twelve completely independent writings.

Recent Studies

Since 1979, a number of works have appeared dealing with literary and historical issues surrounding the topic.⁸ This work on the Book of the Twelve in recent years has resulted in several models regarding how and when the writings entered the developing corpus. There is no space in this commentary to explore adequately

the complexity and relative merits of the various models. Nevertheless, more agreement exists on some issues than on others regarding the history of the developing corpus. For this reason, a brief summary of points of agreement and disagreement may help the reader of this commentary to place these discussions in context.

Current State of Redactional Discussions

Relatively widespread is the idea that the Book of the Twelve was preceded by two multivolume collections that each experienced editorial changes in light of their respective writings: the Book of Four and the Haggai/Zechariah 1–8 corpus. The Book of Four refers to Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah as an edited collection whose common editing reflects concerns of the exilic and early postexilic period, probably from a group living within Judah. Patterned references to kings in the superscriptions of these four writings provide the chronological framework upon which much of the Twelve rests. [Kings in Superscriptions] In most models, Hosea and Amos circulated together even earlier. This group of four functions together to provide a prophetic rationale for the destruction of Israel and Judah, particularly as recounted in the book of Kings. Hosea and Amos focus on the northern kingdom with occasional

Kings in Superscriptions



Five kings are mentioned in the superscriptions of Hosea, Amos, and Micah in a manner that suggests these writings have been linked together editorially.

Hosea 1:1	Amos 1:1	Micah 1:1	Zephaniah 1:1
Uzziah (Judah) (786–746)	Uzziah (Judah)		
Jotham (Judah) (756–741)		Jotham (Judah)	(Hezekiah mentioned)
Ahaz (Judah) (741–725)		Ahaz (Judah)	
Hezekiah (Judah) (725–696)		Hezekiah (Judah)	
Jeroboam (Israel) (786–746)	Jeroboam (Israel)		Josiah (Judah) (639–608)

The superscription in Hosea list all five kings, but names the four kings of Judah sequentially before listing Jeroboam, king of Israel, last—the only king of Israel mentioned even though there were kings of Israel ruling during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. By contrast, Amos 1:1 lists only Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam king of Israel, two kings who were roughly contemporary with one another. Mic 1:1 lists the same three kings of Judah who appear in Hos 1:1 as the second, third, and fourth kings mentioned. However, the internal evidence of Micah provides no solid indication of texts unequivocally related to the time of Jotham or Ahaz (see the commentary on Mic 1–3), suggesting that Mic 1:1 shows more interest in coordinating a time frame with Hosea and Amos than with reflecting the life of the prophet. Zeph 1:1 jumps from the reign of Hezekiah to Josiah, leaving a gap of nearly 60 years, conveniently ignoring Manasseh (696–641) and Amon (641–640), the two kings of Judah who are categorically denounced in negative terms (2 Kgs 21:2, 10–12, 20–23). Nevertheless, this chronological gap is effectively closed by tracing the genealogy of the prophet Zephaniah back an unprecedented four generations in order to link him to King Hezekiah (see the discussion of Zeph 1:1).

notes regarding Judah, while Micah and Zephaniah pick up with the destruction of the northern kingdom and focus on the anticipated destruction of Jerusalem. Further, the structure of the collections of these four writings creates a pattern whereby first Israel and then Judah are presented with choices regarding their fate, though neither responds positively to those choices. Hosea continually alternates messages of judgment with words of hope for Israel, while Amos begins with the assumption that Israel will not change, so that the message of judgment is never really in doubt. Micah begins with a warning to Judah and Jerusalem not to be like Israel, and then proceeds to alternate words of judgment and words of hope, much like Hosea. Zephaniah, like Amos, leaves no doubt that judgment is coming, but Zephaniah's words of judgment, like Micah's, are directed toward Judah and Jerusalem. Both Amos and Zephaniah receive eschatological expansions at the end of their respective writings dealing with the restoration of the kingdom. Micah also contains eschatological material, especially in the promise sections, dealing with the same themes.

Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 constitute a second group of writings that seem to have existed independently as an edited collection of two before being added to the Book of Four. These two writings focus on the same time frame using similar chronological formulae, and both deal extensively with the question of the reconstruction of the temple and its implications.

Less clarity has been achieved regarding when the remaining six writings entered the corpus. Here the various redactional models still present a rather dizzying array of possibilities for reconstructing the order(s) in which these six writings arose and/or were incorporated into the Book of the Twelve. What does seem clear from these discussions is that four of the six (Nahum, Habakkuk, Jonah, and Malachi) play directly off the chronological movement created by the superscriptions of the six writings dated to the reigns of particular kings.

The last king mentioned in Micah (Hezekiah) and the king mentioned in Zephaniah (Josiah) leaves a gap of sixty to eighty eventful years of the seventh century unaccounted for. During this period, Assyria *de facto* controlled Judah economically and militarily before Assyria was destroyed in 612 BCE. Soon thereafter, Babylon would defeat Egypt and become the *de facto* ruling power in Judah following the battle of Carchemish in 605. It is surely no accident

that Nahum follows Micah and deals with the imminent downfall of Assyria, while Habakkuk begins with the same prophetic denunciations of society that appear at the beginning of Micah 7, and then pronounces YHWH's decision to send Babylon to punish Judah. Nahum and Habakkuk thus effectively fill the chronological gap between Micah and Zephaniah. Redactionally, theophanic hymns added to the beginning of Nahum and the end of Habakkuk both emphasize the role of YHWH in overthrowing enemy nations.

Jonah is largely viewed as a latecomer to the collection. The story stands out dramatically from the other prophetic writings for several reasons, both formal and thematic. Nevertheless, Jonah's position in the MT reflects a chronological awareness. Jonah, according to 2 Kings 24:15, was a prophet of the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II, the last king mentioned in the superscription of Amos. Since the first king mentioned in Micah, Jotham, comes after Jeroboam, the book of Jonah must come after Amos and before Micah if it is to observe the chronology implied in the Book of the Twelve.

The fourth undated writing that owes its location to chronological considerations is Malachi, the final writing within the Book of the Twelve. Its reference to the ruler using the Persian word for governor provides strong evidence that Malachi reflects the Persian period setting. The fact that the temple in Malachi appears to be fully functional means that Malachi cannot precede either Haggai or Zechariah, both of whom presume the temple is not yet completely built. Thus, ten of the twelve writings owe their position, in some way, to a chronological arrangement that unfolds across the writings.

The locations of the other two writings, Joel and Obadiah, are closely associated with adjacent writings by thematic and linguistic elements. This commentary treats both writings as composite productions of preexisting source material that have been joined together in light of their respective positions in the Book of the Twelve.

Joel functions as the literary anchor for the entire corpus. Joel begins with an extended call to repentance, precisely the way that Hosea ends; and it concludes with an eschatological portrayal of judgment against the nations, while Amos begins with an extended pronouncement of judgment against the nations. The fact that Joel

3:16, 18 (MT 4:16, 18) contain quotes from Amos 1:2 and 9:13 means that the end of Joel effectively cites the beginning and end of Amos.

Obadiah deals with the fate of Edom in ways that parallel the structure and theme of Amos 9, a passage that deals with the destruction of Israel. From a Judean perspective, the destruction of Israel and Edom plays off the fate of their respective ancestors, Jacob and Esau. The intricacy of the connections of Joel and Obadiah to their contexts suggests that their final form owes much to their literary locations in the Book of the Twelve.

For these reasons, there is little doubt that the six undated writings have undergone editing based upon their locations in the Book of the Twelve. What continues to be debated is the extent and sequence of the editorial adaptations by which the six undated writings, and Zechariah 9–14, were incorporated into the larger

collection. These debates have yet to achieve consensus. For example, several of the redactional models argue that Malachi originally followed Zechariah 8, while chapters 9–14 were inserted later. Others argue that Zechariah 9–14 were added following Zechariah 8, while Malachi was added later. Debates about the book of Joel center largely on the time elapsed between the constituent parts and whether these components entered in a single compositional act or whether Joel developed in stages (and if so, which of these stages involved an orientation for the Book of the Twelve). So, investigations into the editing the Book of the Twelve have made much progress, but they still require more work to resolve these issues with some degree of consensus.

Choir of Prophets



Fra Angelico (1387–1455). *Choir of Prophets*. Duomo, Orvieto, Italy. (Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

Fra Angelico placed the company of Old Testament prophets to the left of Christ in this work that adorns the ceiling of the Chapel of St. Brizio in the Duomo, Orvieto, Italy. The Minor Prophets and Daniel sit in successive tiers above and behind Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, with the entire body making up a tribunal of judgment.

Current State of the Literary Analysis

Synchronic studies on the Book of the Twelve have also developed during the same time, without necessarily assuming a diachronic model for the common transmission lying behind the final form of these

texts. [Synchronic and Diachronic] Before turning to the recurring themes, a few words about the nature of this prophetic book are in order.

The Nature of the Book. The Book of the Twelve unfolds as a compendium of prophetic speeches and stories delivered ostensibly by prophets from the eighth century until well into the Persian period. These twelve writings thus cover a 300- to 400-year span, and most of the writings within the Book of the Twelve exhibit signs that they circulated as independent collections before being incorporated into a developing multivolume corpus. But what is this corpus attempting to do? Brief mention of two texts (Neh 9:32 and Mal 3:16-18), one inside the Book of the Twelve and one outside, provides a necessary perspective for understanding the Book of the Twelve from two directions: (1) as a book design to be studied alongside the story of Israel and Judah, providing a rationale for Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian occupation of YHWH's land, and (2) as a book designed to provide instruction for the faithful.

Nehemiah 9:32 offers insight into an important concept that helps to explain why the prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve) begin only with the eighth century, even though prophets appear in the narratives of the Torah and Joshua through Kings long before the eighth century. Nehemiah 9 presents an episode from the postexilic period when Ezra stands before the people, on a platform made by the Levites (9:4), and begins to teach them about the history of YHWH's people. His interpretation of this history, beginning in 9:6, recounts the outline of a continuing canonical narrative. This narrative runs from Abraham (9:7-8), through the exodus and the wilderness (9:9-23), the conquest (9:24-25), and the judges and kings (9:26-31). It continually emphasizes YHWH's compassion and the people's stubbornness. At that point, Ezra petitions YHWH in 9:32 to change the fate of the people ("Do not treat lightly the hardships that have come upon us . . ."). This petition recognizes YHWH's justice (see 9:33), but asks YHWH to take into account that the punishment has already lasted "from the time of the kings of Assyria until today." In other words, it is not just the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem that are depicted as YHWH's punishment, but the time of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian occupation that runs from the eighth century to the Persian period.

Synchronic and Diachronic



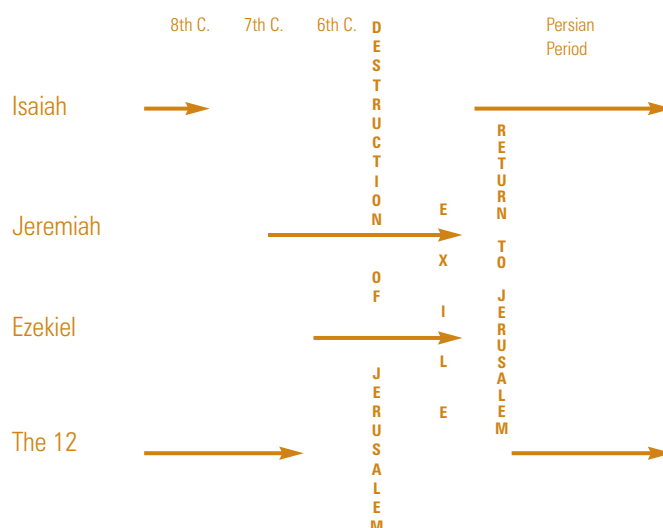
In biblical studies these two terms now largely refer to various methodologies and their approach to the question of how a text came into its present form. Synchronic methods do not concern themselves with a text's history or prehistory. They look only at the final form of the text. Diachronic methods, by contrast, evaluate texts, in part, by asking questions designed to determine a text's history.

This is precisely the time frame covered by the Book of the Twelve and Isaiah. [The Time Frame of the Latter Prophets] Jeremiah and Ezekiel deal with the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth centuries. This time frame is thus covered by the prophetic writings, and they illustrate the reasons for YHWH's punishment, YHWH's attempts to bring Israel and Judah back to YHWH, and YHWH's continuing acts of judgment and deliverance.

The Time Frame of the Latter Prophets



The four Latter Prophets, in their most common order, represent a collection whose chronological perspective pivots around the destruction of Jerusalem, as indicated in the following chart.



Both Isaiah and the Twelve span the time from the eighth century to the Persian period. Significantly, both books skip the destruction of Jerusalem entirely. They either look forward to it or they look back upon it, but they do not describe it. For example, Isaiah subtly anticipates Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon with the account of Hezekiah's showing off of Jerusalem's wealth to the Babylonians (Isa 39:1-8) which concludes a four-chapter block of texts (36–39) that also appear in 2 Kings (18–20). These texts, whose literary setting is the eighth century, come just prior to Isaiah 40, which begins with the announcement that Jerusalem's punishment is over. In the Twelve, a similar jump occurs when Zephaniah, set in the time of the seventh-century king Josiah, pronounces the coming destruction of Jerusalem (chs. 1–2) that will ultimately lead to Jerusalem's restoration (ch. 3). The next book, Haggai, picks up with the people back in the land and the prophet's challenge to rebuild

the temple. In chronological terms, Isaiah jumps from 700 (just after Sennacherib's siege) to around 539 (the reign of Cyrus) while the Twelve jumps from the time of Josiah (640–609) to 520. Ezekiel begins after the first deportation (597 BCE) but ends with a vision of the restored temple (40–48). Jeremiah begins in Josiah's thirteenth year (1:2), or 627 BCE, and ends with a parallel from 2 Kgs 24:18–25:21, 27–30, noting Zedekiah's reign and Jerusalem's destruction (Jer 52:1–30) and Jehoiachin's release in 560 BCE (Jer 52:31–34). Thus, Ezekiel and Jeremiah cover the destruction and exile, with Jeremiah starting a bit earlier. Isaiah and the Twelve cover the same time frame as one another (including skipping the time frame covered by Jeremiah and Ezekiel). Yet, one corpus covers from the eighth century to the Persian period using the voice of one named prophet (Isaiah) while the other corpus uses twelve prophetic figures to accomplish the same task.

The end of Malachi (3:16-18) refers to a Book of Remembrance that was written to give guidance to those fearing YHWH. Often misinterpreted as a book containing the names of the faithful, this Book of Remembrance in actuality is presented as a book for the faithful to help them remember YHWH and to discern between the righteous and the wicked before the coming day of YHWH. This book is precisely the model of the Book of the Twelve in which twelve prophetic writings take the reader from the eighth century to the Persian period, documenting YHWH's accusations, punishments, deliverance, and hopes for the people of Judah and Israel.

Recurring Themes and Motifs. At least four recurring themes and related motifs have been isolated in a wide array of essays and monographs.⁹ They include the day of YHWH, fertility of the land, the fate of God's people, and the theodicy problem.

1. Perhaps the most notable recurring theme, the overwhelming majority of references to the "day of YHWH" in the Hebrew Bible appears in the Book of the Twelve. The day of YHWH, however, can also be elicited with other terms, such as a day of affliction or a day of darkness. Further, claims about what will happen on this impending day do not reflect a single, imposed ideology. Instead, this recurring imagery creates a tapestry of expectations for the imminent and distant future as one reads through the Book of the Twelve. This day of YHWH refers to a point of divine intervention, but each reference must be evaluated in its context to understand the time frame, the targets, and the means YHWH will utilize on the coming day. The time frame can be imminent, requiring an immediate response (e.g., Joel 2:1-11, 12-17), or it can be distant, instilling hope that things may change (e.g., Joel 3:1-21 [MT 4:1-21]). The target can be YHWH's people (in the form of Judah, Jerusalem, Israel, or Samaria) or various foreign nations (Edom in Obadiah, Assyria in Nahum, Babylon in Habakkuk 3, or the nations as a group in Zechariah 14). The means by which YHWH intervenes on this day can include YHWH's role as heavenly judge in Joel 3, or as the commander of the heavenly host as in Joel 2:1-11. It can also imply YHWH's use of an earthly nation such as Assyria in Micah 7 or Babylon in Habakkuk 3. This motif does have climactic passages in the Book of the Twelve. Joel's presentation of the day of YHWH that threatens first Judah, then the nations, seems paradigmatic for the

corpus. Zephaniah 1:1-18 depicts the imminent destruction of Jerusalem using a cluster of phrases for the day of YHWH that appear elsewhere in the corpus. Zechariah 14 offers a composite collection of images and expectations for the judgment of the nations on the day of YHWH. Malachi 3 ends the Book of the Twelve with the expectation of the coming day of YHWH that will be used to purify God's people, separating the righteous from the wicked. On the one hand, this variety of expectations strongly suggests the use of divergent source material; on the other, the prominence and in some cases the interplay of these day of YHWH passages with other texts in the corpus suggest this perspective characterizes the Book of the Twelve in ways that are distinct from the other three prophetic books.

2. The second recurring theme, the fertility of the land, plays a significant role in the Book of the Twelve on several levels. This motif is first encountered in the judgment and promise metaphors of Hosea 2. Hosea 2 portrays YHWH's wife as a harlot motivated by the produce of the land. Here, the harlotry serves as metaphor for idolatry, and the wife serves as metaphor for the land. As a result of her actions, YHWH withholds the grain, wine, and oil (2:8 [MT 2:10]) in an attempt to get her to recognize that these gifts come from YHWH, not Baal. This judgment material turns to promise as YHWH isolates his wife in the wilderness, seeking to restore their relationship (2:16-20 [MT 2:18-22]). Then YHWH will answer the earth and restore the grain, wine, and oil (2:21-23 [MT 2:23-25]). The promise material in Hosea's concluding call to repentance includes promises for the olive tree (14:6 [MT 14:7]), the grain, and the vine (14:7 [MT 14:8]). These promises parallel the elements whose restoration 2:21-23 anticipates since the oil comes from the olive tree, and wine comes from the vine. These changes will come about only if the people repent.

Juxtaposed to this promise, the book of Joel opens with the land of Judah in utter devastation, leading Joel to issue a call to repentance. At the core of Joel's description of the land lie several forms of devastation that have cut off the grain, wine, vine, oil, and other agricultural products. In the background of these images, one hears the covenant curses of Deuteronomy (see especially 28:51). The threats in Joel include a series of locust plagues, enemy attack, and drought (some of which take up the language of Hosea 2). The infertility of the land causes the prophet to call the people to repen-

tance (2:12-17) in the hopes that YHWH will restore the land's fertility by restoring the grain, wine, and oil (2:18-19; see also 2:21-22, 24) and removing the foreign army (2:20; see also 2:25). Despite the two promises of Hosea 14:4-7 and Joel 2:18-25, neither of these calls to repentance actually reports that the people repent. The promises are thus contingent upon how people the people respond, but the response of the people is not narrated.

Having discerned a pattern of judgment and promise using the fertility of the land, the reader of the Twelve becomes sensitive to the places in the corpus where this language reappears. When it does reappear, it does so in two ways. When speaking of invading armies or pestilence, the reader finds language associated with the locusts of Joel (see Amos 4:9; Nah 3:15-17; Hab 1:9; Mal 3:11). When focusing upon the fate of the people, the reader finds variations of the constellation of grain, wine, vine, and oil serving to underscore the threat against or promise to the people (see Amos 4:6-12; 9:13-15; Mic 6:15; Hab 3:17; Hag 2:17-19; Mal 3:10-11).

3. The third recurring theme concerns the fate of God's people. It is closely related to and often intertwined with language about the fertility of the land, but it also includes political and eschatological perspectives. The fate of the people is at issue in both of the preexisting corpora.

In the Book of Four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah), the fate of God's people concerns punishment and restoration of Israel and Judah. Hosea and Amos essentially explain the downfall of the northern kingdom with illustrations of Israel's cultic and political shortcomings. Micah begins by applying the lessons of Samaria's destruction to Judah and Jerusalem (1:2-7) before outlining the prospects for judgment and deliverance in the remainder of the book. Zephaniah, like Amos, presumes judgment is unavoidable, but Zephaniah deals with the judgment of Judah and Jerusalem in this context rather than the northern kingdom. All four of these writings also contain promissory material for Israel and Judah. Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah in particular conclude with promises that represent exilic and postexilic eschatological perspectives.

Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 illustrate the positive outcomes for the people when they begin to return to YHWH. The temple is rebuilt because Haggai confronts the priest, the governor, and the people with the need to express their commitment to YHWH. Zechariah begins with an account of the repentance of the people

(1:2-6) followed by the prophet's vision to restore Jerusalem and punish the nations (see 1:14-17). By the end of this collection, it is clear that things have begun to change for the better but that consistency will be required if the full measure of restoration is to come about (8:9-12).

The remaining six writings and Zechariah 9–14 deal with the fate of the people in various ways. Joel offers a paradigm that functions, in many ways, for the entire corpus of the Twelve. A call to repentance goes out amid the devastation of the land and the impending day of YHWH because repentance represents the only hope for restoration. Once Judah and Jerusalem repent, the day of YHWH against the nations can begin. Obadiah anticipates that, like the northern kingdom, Edom will also be punished and this punishment will inaugurate the day of YHWH against the nations. Nahum and Habakkuk offer both the anticipation of judgment against YHWH's people and their ultimate deliverance. Nahum does so by celebrating YHWH's decision to overthrow Assyria, while Habakkuk anticipates both the arrival and the destruction of Babylon. Zechariah 9–14 explores various eschatological scenarios for Ephraim (9–11) and for Judah (9; 12–14) with a particular emphasis upon the coming day of YHWH. Malachi challenges cultic abuse by both the people and the priests as the harbinger of the coming day of YHWH wherein the righteous within Judah will be purified while the wicked will be punished. One cannot hope to escape the day of YHWH—only to survive it by God's grace.

4. The fourth recurring theme concerns theodicy. The major texts exploring this issue appear within the first seven writings. Specifically, four of these writings (Joel, Micah, Nahum, and Jonah) develop aspects of YHWH's compassion and judgment through citations of Exodus 34:6-7. Joel 2:13-14 draws upon Exodus 34:6, dealing with the compassion of YHWH toward YHWH's people, while Joel 3:19-21 (MT 4:19-21) alludes to Exodus 34:7 to affirm YHWH's eventual punishment of the wicked. The same dual emphasis reappears in the corpus at the end of Micah and the beginning of Nahum where Micah 7:18-20 draws upon Exodus 34:6 to plead for YHWH's compassion, while Nahum 1:3 draws upon Exodus 34:6-7 to affirm YHWH's punishment of the wicked.

Going beyond this duality, the narrative in Jonah plays upon Joel's version of Exodus 34:6-7, complicating the issue on at least

two levels theologically. By stressing YHWH's compassionate character, Jonah 4:2 accuses YHWH, through the discontent of the prophet, of being too soft. For the character of Jonah, YHWH's propensity for compassion gets in the way of justice. Further, to make matters worse, YHWH exercises this compassion upon the nations (illustrated by YHWH's failure to punish Nineveh) as well as YHWH's own people. By satirizing Jonah's myopic view, of course, the story of Jonah challenges particularistic attitudes that do not take account of YHWH's salvific work in the world.

The theme of theodicy also comes into play in a series of four texts related to the mockery of Judah by the nations; two of these texts anticipate judgment in the form of becoming a mockery among the nations, while the other two promise to remove this burden. These texts include Joel 2:17, 19; Micah 6:16; and Zephaniah 3:18. Once again, Joel has a pair of texts with this motif. Joel 2:17 offers a petition that YHWH's people not become a byword among the nations, while 2:19 appears as a promise from YHWH that if the people do repent, YHWH will no longer make them a byword among the nations. Micah 6:16 condemns Judah for behaving like the northern kingdom with the result that they will become a mockery, but Zephaniah 3:18 offers a promise from YHWH that Zion will no longer be a mockery.

The final disputation in Malachi raises the issue of theodicy one last time in the Book of the Twelve when YHWH confronts the people for questioning his justice and his presence (3:13-15). In response, YHWH affirms that the wicked will perish on the day of YHWH, while the righteous who are prepared will survive that day (3:19-21 [MT 4:1-3]).

In the end, the effect of these theodicy texts reinforces the image of YHWH as a just deity who tempers judgment with compassion, but whose compassion has limits. YHWH's compassion extends beyond the borders of Judah to powerful foreign empires (so Jonah), but these empires will also be judged when they abandon YHWH's righteousness (so Nahum). YHWH's own people also become the subject of judgment, but time and again YHWH shows compassion by removing that judgment. At the end of Malachi, the threat of judgment for the wicked on the day of YHWH affirms a basic response to the theodicy problem. Namely, the wicked prosper only for a time because they will be judged by YHWH at a time of YHWH's choosing. The role of the righteous

is to remain faithful in order to endure the coming day of YHWH. Toward this end, a book of remembrance is provided to the faithful to help them discern between the righteous and the wicked.

These four recurring motifs create an intriguing web of connections. A case can be made that many of these links were intentionally created in the process of compiling and editing the writings within the Twelve. Cumulatively, especially given the early traditions that the Twelve was a single scroll, these recurring motifs put the Book of the Twelve on a par with the other three scrolls of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). At some point, one needs to ask about the role of the entire corpus for creating meaning, not merely the individual passages. In the case of the Twelve, the web of motifs invites questions and leads to theological reflection. The links often assume one knows the story of Judah and Israel as told in the Torah and the Former Prophets. As one reflects upon these connections, one also cannot help pondering how one sees one's own story politically, ecclesiologically, and personally in comparison to the message of the Twelve.

NOTES

1. Recent work has demonstrated that the term "prophets" in the next three centuries does not always refer to the second portion of the canon, but in my opinion, this variety does not affect how the term is understood in the prologue of Sirach because of the so-called "Hymn of the Fathers" in chapters 44–50.

2. The five books of the Torah followed by the eight books in the Nebi'im (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve) totaled 13 books for the first two parts of the canon. Twelve writings make up the Ketubim, ultimately providing for 25 books in the canon. Josephus's number of 22 books probably means he did not accept some of these writings as authoritative. Some combination of Esther (because it never mentions God), Song of Songs (because of the explicit sexual imagery), and Ecclesiastes (because of the theological difficulties it creates) would be the most likely candidates for exclusion in Josephus's number. The reference to 24 books in 4 Ezra 14 means that the author omitted one book, or counted Ezra/Nehemiah as a single book.

3. *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969) 1374.

4. That such sequential reading did take place can be deduced, for example, from rabbinic traditions concerning Nahum and Jonah. See Beate Ego, "The Repentance of Nineveh in the Story of Jonah and Nahum's Prophecy of the City's Destruction—A Coherent Reading of the Book of the Twelve as Reflected in the Aggadah," in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. Paul L. Redditt and Aaron Scharf; BZAW 325; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 155–64.

5. A third order appears in one Qumran manuscript wherein Jonah appears at the end of the corpus following Malachi. See Russell Earl Fuller, "The Form and Formation of the Book of the Twelve: The Evidence from the Judean Desert," 86–101, in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honour of John D. W. Watts* (ed. Paul R. House and James W. Watts; JSOTSup 235; Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 9–496. The canonical implications for this one manuscript, however, are minimal. See O. H. Steck, "Zur Abfolge Maleachi—Jona in 4Q76 (4QXIIa)," *ZAW* 108 (1996): 249–53.

6. More work needs to be done concerning the Septuagint version of the Book of the Twelve, but only a small minority has suggested the LXX order is older. See, for example, Barry Alan Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon* (SBLDS 149; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 43–78. See also the work of Sweeney, who explores how the different orders change the focus of the two collections: Marvin A. Sweeney, "Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney; SBLSymS 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) 49–64.

7. See James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) and James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993).

8. A thorough online bibliography on the topic has been maintained by Aaron Scharf and can be consulted (http://www.uni-due.de/Ev-Theologie/twelve/12b_bib.htm).

9. These four areas are explored more thoroughly than can be done here in *Int* 61 (2007), a volume devoted entirely to literary and theological readings of the Book of the Twelve.

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MICAH

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF MICAH

Dating the Prophet and the Book

According to Micah 1:1, the prophet Micah prophesied during the reigns of three kings, but references to specific events that can be dated stem only from the reign of Hezekiah. [Micah in Jewish Tradition] Also according to 1:1, 14, this prophet comes from Moresheth, a town about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem. Because of the strong critique leveled against Jerusalem's leadership in Micah 2–3, scholars often note how Micah conveys the interests of this region.¹ A strong consensus of critical scholars isolates material dated to this eighth-century prophet only in chapters 1–3.² Among others, Jeremias makes the case that even chapters 1–3 show evidence of redactional shaping from the time of the exile (including 1:1, 3–7; 2:3–5, 10).³ The remaining material in chapters 1–3 that refers to historical events from the eighth century most likely pinpoints events associated with the siege of Sennacherib in 701 BCE.

Micah is a complex book thematically, literarily, historically, and redactionally. The complexity of Micah suggests that the material traced specifically to an early prophetic messenger appears only in early portions of Micah 1–3. Micah

1:1 dates the prophet's ministry to kings who ruled in the last half of the eighth century BCE: Jotham (756–741); Ahaz (742–725); Hezekiah (725–696). However, even portions of Micah 1–3 appear to have been later edited in light of the message of Kings, a book not completed prior to 560 BCE. [The Date of Kings] Micah 1:2–7 presumes

Micah in Jewish Tradition



The prophet Micah is not a prominent figure in rabbinic literature. He is seldom mentioned, and then only to speculate on the time in which he lived, or in a couple of narratives in which he plays only an ancillary role. The rabbis had difficulty dating the prophet Micah in some instances. Some tried to associate him with other persons named Micah in biblical texts, most notably Micaiah ben Imlah (Ginsburg, 6:355, note 20). Additionally, while most references date him roughly contemporary with Isaiah, there are discrepancies regarding whether he preceded or came after that prophet. In one account, for example, Isaiah receives his call after Micah has been rejected by Israel and physically abused (Ginsburg, 6:358, note 32). By contrast, some traditions even label him a postexilic prophet (Ginsburg, 6:314, note 56). In terms of narrative episodes, only once does Micah come into play. Micah appears in a list of prophets (along with Isaiah, Joel, and Habakkuk) who left Jerusalem rather than continue to witness the abominations of Manasseh, the king who followed Hezekiah. Nothing else, however, is said about the prophet.

Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947).

The Date of Kings



The book of Kings was originally a single scroll, not two different books. Kings opens with the end of David's reign (c. 960 BCE) and concludes with the release of Jehoiachin in the year 560 BCE (37 years after he was taken captive by the Babylonians). Despite reference to these specific events, covering four centuries, dating the book of Kings is not without some controversy. Most date the final form of the book to shortly after Jehoiachin's release. Since M. Noth, this date has been widely accepted, though a few would push it into the early Persian Period. On the other hand, quite a number of scholars have followed F. M. Cross in arguing that an early version of Kings (and the entire Deuteronomistic History) was produced in the reign of Josiah (between 620–609). Even among those who opt for an early version, however, it seems likely that 2 Kgs 17:7–20 already directs its message to those living after Jerusalem's destruction. Almost certainly, 2 Kings 17:19 reflects the application of Samaria's fate to Judah and presumes Jerusalem's destruction ("Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced"). As a result, the portions of Micah that assume awareness of Kings (1:1b, 5–7) and that correlate the fate of Jerusalem with Samaria likely draw upon this later, exilic version of Kings.

See the brief synopsis in Gary N. Knoppers, "Introduction," in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 1–7.

Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 15; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981).

Frank Moore Cross, "The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 79–94.

one should interpret Samaria's destruction as a warning to Jerusalem, a message more fully developed in 2 Kings 17. Other portions of Micah 1–3, however, may reflect an older collection of sayings more closely associated with the eighth-century prophet: 1:8–16; 2:1–3(4); 2:6–11; 3:1–12.

In its final form, Micah 1–3 reflects upon eighth-century concerns, but these reflections were edited to be read with Hosea and Amos. [Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah] Thematically, Micah 1–3 almost exclusively relays words of judgment (2:12–13 represents the only deviation). Parts of Micah 1–3 (especially 1:8–16) refer to the last quarter of the eighth century in broad terms, alluding both to Samaria's destruction in 722 BCE and to the impending siege of Sennacherib (701 BCE). Other portions of 1–3 use accusatory language that cannot be dated specifically, but most commentators date it to the eighth century. Moreover, the judgment anticipated in Micah 1–3 is directed toward Judah and Jerusalem, but Samaria's destruction serves as an illustrative example of Jerusalem's fate if Jerusalem does not change course (1:1, 5–7; 3:12). This paradigmatic use of Samaria and Israel fits well with a major thrust of the book of Kings (see 2 Kings 17) but suggests, even

though much of the chapter concerns eighth-century events, that the editing of Micah 1–3 took place in an exilic context that had been influenced by this claim. The introductory unit (Mic 1:2–7) thus shows signs of exilic theology, but it also draws from the book of Hosea (see discussion of Mic 1:5–7). Likewise, Micah 2:5 draws upon Amos 5:13. The introductory formulas of Micah 3:1, 9 are also reminiscent of major blocks of Hosea and Amos, suggesting they may have been adapted for the developing corpus during the exile when these books appear to have been transmitted and edited together.

Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah

Of necessity, this discussion assumes an ongoing discussion of the redaction history of the Book of the Twelve that surmises that Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah exhibit signs of collection and editing together beginning in the exilic period. For additional reading on this Book of Four, see James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) especially 278–80; Aaron Scharf, *Die Entstehung des des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftenuebergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) especially 31–49, 98–100, and 177–204; Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilzeit: 6. Jahrhunder v. Chr* (Biblische Enzyklopädie 7;

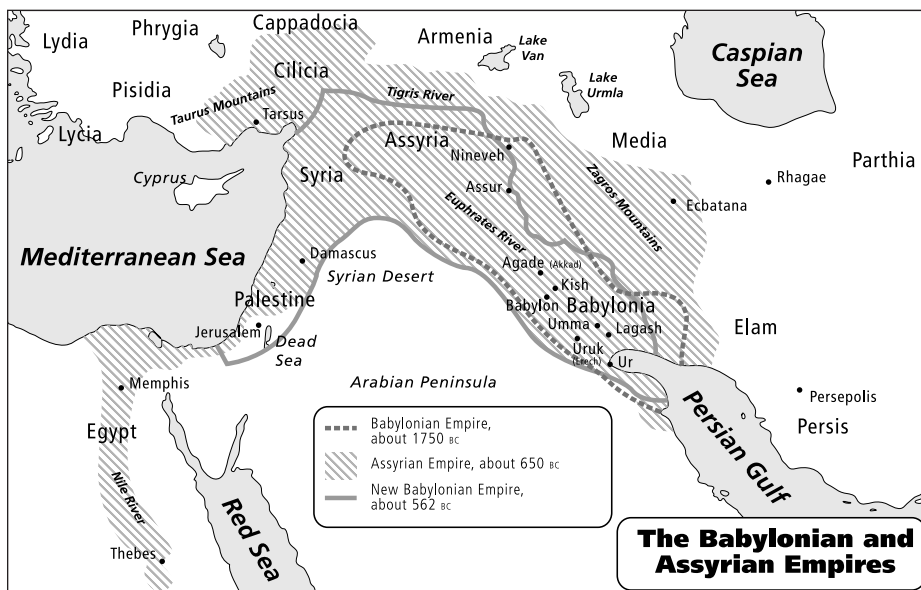
Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001) 163–85; and Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW 389; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008) 11–12. For a brief synopsis of this ongoing discussion, see “Current State of Redactional Discussions” in the “Introduction to the Book of the Twelve” at the beginning of this commentary and James D. Nogalski, “One Book and Twelve Books: The Nature of the Redactional Work and the Implications of Cultic Source Material in the Book of the Twelve,” in Ehud Ben Zvi and James D. Nogalski, *Two Sides of a Coin: Juxtaposing Views on Interpreting the Book of the Twelve/The Twelve Prophetic Books* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009) 11–46.

Micah 4–5 probably contains some of the latest passages of the book, though it, too, has material from more than one hand. Its primary interest lies in structuring the future, using a prophetic voice from the eighth century as the literary venue for doing so. This prophetic voice “anticipates” both the threat to Jerusalem posed by Assyria in the next century and the demise of Assyria (5:5–6). These chapters, though, also contain threats against Jerusalem that include pronouncements of devastation and exile to Babylon (4:9–10). Yet the bulk of 4–5 offers comfort to Jerusalem that God will restore “her” *after* “her” time of punishment is complete. [Jerusalem Personified] Thus, Micah 4–5 interprets the seventh and sixth centuries as a time that will threaten Judah, but these chapters anticipate both Judah’s punishment and restoration. In this respect, then, these chapters have a strong eschatological character that is hard to explain until well into the Persian period.

The core message of Micah 6–7 contains two large blocks (Mic 6:1–7:7; 7:8–20) that anticipate Jerusalem’s destruction. The first unit is more consistent with the accusations of Micah 1:2–7, while the second exhibits a postexilic vantage point in its hope that Judah’s relationship with YHWH will thrive after a time of punishment. Micah 6:1–7:7 contains numerous references to other canonical traditions: Numbers (wilderness motifs in Mic 6:3–5), the Deuteronomistic History (Omri and Ahab in Mic 6:16), Amos (in Mic 6:10–12), and Deuteronomy (in Mic 6:2).⁴ Micah 6:1–7:7 is largely accusatory. The accusations against Judah reflect the paradigmatic nature of Israel’s destruction as a warning to Jerusalem. The late exilic setting of this material is widely, though not univer-

Assyrian and Babylonian Empires

The Assyrian empire would control Egypt by 663 BCE. The territory stretched across most of the ancient Near East. Babylon defeated Nineveh in 612 BCE and began imposing its political and military will in the Levant shortly thereafter, although Babylonian control never extended as far as the Assyrians' empire. The map below shows that the Assyrian empire (shaded) extended further in both directions than the Babylonian empire (the outer solid lines). The conquest of the Mediterranean coast by Sennacherib and the threat to Jerusalem in 701 play a major role in the background of Micah 1–3.



sally, recognized.⁵ Micah 7:8-20 contains a postexilic collection of (mostly) salvific speeches from various speakers, giving the passage a liturgical character while poetically anticipating the Assyrian and Babylonian occupations of the land that Judah will have to endure.⁶

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity of Micah

The form of Micah results from material whose origins are quite diverse. Micah 1–3 and 6 primarily deliver messages of admonition and accusation to Judah that use both prophetic speech and divine speech. Micah 4–5 and 7, on the other hand, primarily deliver words of hope oriented toward the “future,” though the variety of the messages indicates that more than one future period is in view for the individual units within these chapters.

These larger thematic blocks, however, are not entirely consistent. Micah 2:12-13 interrupts 1–3 with a brief message of hope, while several passages intersperse the promises in Micah 4–5 with a

Jerusalem Personified



Linguistically, “city” in Hebrew is a feminine noun and requires a feminine singular pronoun. However, in prophetic traditions, the use of this feminine pronoun goes much further in that “Lady Zion” appears as a personification. This personification creates texture that should not be ignored, and it also creates troubling theological problems for modern readers. The personification can emphasize Jerusalem’s importance by speaking of her as mother, with her children being the people of Jerusalem. This personified city can also be depicted as having a special relationship with YHWH. This personification allows prophets to depict her as the wife of YHWH, who can challenge YHWH (e.g., Isa 49:14) and it allows YHWH to express his devotion to her (e.g., Isa 49:15-18; 60:1-22). These same relational qualities can also be used by YHWH to condemn her as an adulterous woman or a prostitute who has broken her

vows of fidelity by chasing other “lovers,” a metaphor for other gods (see Jer 2:2-3; Ezek 16:1-63; see Judah personified with similar metaphors in Jer 3:6-10).

For further reading, see Mark Edward Biddle, “The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East,” in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (Scripture in Context 4; B. Batto, W. Hallo, and L. Younger, eds.; Lewiston, New York: Mellen Press) 173–94; Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). For other places in the Book of the Twelve where Lady Zion comes into play more prominently, see [Cities Personified] in Hos 2 and the treatment of the role of Lady Zion in Mic 4:9-13, as well as the discussions of Mic 7:8-10; Zeph 3:14-20; and Zech 1:12-17; 9:9-13.

message that impending judgment against Jerusalem will still happen as well (4:9-10, 11; 5:1, 7). In other words, the nation will face both deliverance and severe trials. Likewise, the accusations of 6:1–7:7 conclude with words of trust (7:7), and reminders of impending judgment (7:[12-]13) punctuate the salvific message of 7:8-20.⁷

Thus, the structure of Micah, in its final form, includes alternating words of judgment and salvation toward Judah in much the same way that the structure of Hosea alternates between these theological poles for Israel. To begin with, Micah 1:1–2:11 brings unambiguous words of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, while Micah 2:12-13 offers a brief, ambiguous message of hope for a remnant. Next, 3:1-12 returns quickly to judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. Micah 4:1–5:15 offers a complex message of promise for the distant future, though the current generation will experience threats to its existence that must be endured. Then, Micah 6:1–7:7 evokes a legal proceeding, accusing Judah of a propensity for violence, false worship, wanton disregard of ethical practices, and disreputable speech. Finally, Micah 7:8-20 concludes Micah with promissory statements, though some are tinged with words of impending desolation as well.

In addition to the alternation of judgment and deliverance, the book’s structural markers (see references to the “days to come” in 4:1; “on that day” in 4:6 and 5:10) suggest that chapters 4–5 function as a place for reflection on the more distant future. From the

perspective of the book's eighth-century literary setting, as noted by Micah 1:1, these chapters anticipate a more distant future. They anticipate the Assyrian and Babylonian incursions into Judah as well as Judah's life after Assyrian (5:6) and Babylonian (4:10) hegemony. In doing so, Micah 4–5 stresses YHWH's control of history. Portions of these chapters also anticipate a continuation of Davidic kingship until the time of Judah's destruction (5:2–4), “anticipating” the lengthy oppression of Assyria through the reigns of eight kings. These chapters do not explicitly refer to the day of YHWH, but they presuppose a return from exile, and they attribute the return to the work of YHWH in keeping a remnant alive (4:7; 5:7).

Micah thus represents a composite unity. Many of the units were originally independent of one another, but their current location shows a deliberate arrangement. The collection grew in stages, but each stage appears to be aware that the primary prophetic voice reflects its message from the perspective of the eighth-century prophet, even though exilic and postexilic expansions increasingly shape Micah as a theological reflection on events from the eighth century to the Persian period. Exilic shaping of the collection increased the connections between Micah, Hosea, and Amos. It also made explicit an interpretation of Samaria's destruction as a warning to Jerusalem (1:2–7; cf. 6:16). The postexilic sections of chapters 4–5 and 7:8–20 “anticipate” the Assyrian and Babylonian occupations, and they offer promises of restoration. These promises differ in how they see the relationship of Judah to the nations, with some promises portraying peaceful times ahead while others look to a more aggressive Zion expelling its enemies from its borders. None of these promises, however, offer unqualified weal. Rather, they all anticipate that things will begin to change for Judah only after a protracted time of punishment.

The Message of Micah

The message of Micah derives from the structured alternation of its positive and negative messages to Judah and Jerusalem. Words of judgment and warning give way to language of promise and hope, but the continuing alternation provides a theological dichotomy that causes readers and hearers to proceed cautiously, to evaluate their own motives, and to understand that the challenge to the present is necessary for a hopeful future.

Various reasons for judgment can be noted in explicit accusations in Micah 1–3 and 4–7. Judgment for unethical actions by the wicked dominates the accusations of Micah 1–3, though condemnation of idolatry also plays a role. Micah 2:1–2 condemns the actions of “those devising evil,” described as greedy acquisition of the property of others. The prophet combines this pronouncement with a judgment designed to fit the crime. Specifically, YHWH will disinherit the people (2:4). Micah 2:8–9 takes up these same ethical violations again, pointing out that the greedy acts against the women and children of society leave them homeless. This passage provides hope for those disinherited by announcing YHWH’s intention to gather them back.

Less prominent in these accusations is the role of idol worship in Micah 1–3. Yet, Micah 1:5–7, 8–9 play on Hosea’s pronouncements of idolatry by applying them to Judah and Jerusalem. Judah’s political and religious leadership receives special mention from YHWH. Micah 3:1–3 portrays the leaders’ greedy actions as cannibalism. The “prophets” are condemned for preaching for money (3:5) rather than proclaiming justice and confronting sin (3:8). A summary of the charge of greed and violence against the leadership (rulers, chiefs, priests, prophets) concludes the accusations in Micah 1–3 (3:9–11) before the final pronouncement of destruction.

In Micah 4–7, one finds fewer explicit accusations and more verdict language. Micah 5:10–15 contains *indirect* accusation in that the punishment includes the destruction of idols and implements of war. However, while they may have originally been directed against YHWH’s people, these sayings currently function as judgment on the nations (see 5:15). Micah 6:1–7:7 contains accusations against Judah. Micah 6:9–12 lists a series of accusations against Judah that condemn the unethical treatment of the population by the wealthy. The accusation that the people follow the path of Omri/Ahab (6:16) alludes obliquely to the worship of other deities. Finally, 7:1–7 lists several charges against Judah (violence, bloodshed, bribery, and contempt) that point to societal disregard of others, disrespect for justice, and contempt for familial and societal order.

Promises to Zion intertwine with verdicts against the nations and guide the rhetoric of Micah 4–5 and 7:8–20. Micah 4 anticipates a time of peace for all nations, but it will not come soon. Peace is the ultimate goal (4:1–4), and Zion is the center of the peaceful world.

Peace, however, is not realized until the nations assemble against Zion and she fights back (4:11-13).

For Lady Zion, promise does not lessen the severity of a coming judgment. Promise for Judah lies in the distant future. The promise texts, unlike the accusations, are framed by formulas like “in days to come” (4:1) and “on that day” (4:6; 5:10 [with 5:15]; 7:12). The promise is anticipated in 4–7 only after the Assyrian threat (explicitly in 5:5-6; implicitly in 7:8-10); after Zion will spend time in Babylon (4:10); and after a remnant will be gathered (4:6-7). The future promise is also depicted as a return to the time of the distant past, using allusions to the conquest (7:15), the wilderness story (7:18), and ancestral traditions (7:20).

Micah 4–7 also promises that a remnant will return and rule Jerusalem (4:6-8), that YHWH will restore Zion’s renown by retaliating against the nations (4:13; 5:7-9, 10, 15), and that YHWH will deliver YHWH’s people (7:7). Promises of a return to a renewed golden age combine with images of YHWH as a shepherd (7:14-17) who forgives iniquity (7:18-20). These promises form the basis for hope in the future.

The call to ethical righteousness in Micah 6:6-8 is an enduring message explaining God’s expectations for all humanity. In context, this message serves as the antidote to the accusations of Micah 6 because it is the reverse image of the society described in 6:9–7:6. Micah 6:6-8 admonishes the people to conduct proper worship (as opposed to idolatry) and to treat others ethically (contrary to the charges elsewhere in 6:9–7:6).

At the end of Micah, the reader is left with hope for the long haul, but dread concerning what must happen before the promises are fulfilled. The presence of YHWH provides hope that God’s grace will ultimately reign, but this hope does not appear to be naive. Consistently, the close reader of Micah realizes that Judah will experience punishment before it finds restoration.

Micah and the Book of the Twelve

Micah plays a pivotal role in the Book of Four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah) by changing the focus of the message from Israel (in Hosea and Amos) to Judah in Micah and Zephaniah. The structure of Micah helps convey part of this message. Like Hosea, the alternation of judgment and hope dominates. Pronouncements of judgment for idolatry *and* ethical abuse in society are a recurring

thread in Hosea and Amos, leading to Zephaniah. Certain texts presume knowledge of specific formulations in Hosea (especially Mic 1:7) and Amos (especially Mic 2:3; 6:10-11), while others communicate similar emphases by thematic parallels.

The eschatological promises in Micah anticipate a period of judgment for Zion, but that restoration in Zion will follow. Like Amos 9:7-15, Micah 5:7-15 anticipates that a remnant will survive in Judah following Jerusalem's destruction and that this remnant will defeat surrounding nations (see also 7:16). Micah 7:11-12 anticipates the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of Judah's cities (cf. Amos 9:11, 13). Micah 7:14-17 promises YHWH's arrival in Jerusalem to fight on Judah's behalf (cf. Zeph 3:14-17). Micah 4:6-7 depicts a remnant ruling in Zion, and this text is cited at the end of Zephaniah (3:19-20), though that citation is formulated in a manner that anticipates that the action is imminent, whereas Micah 4:6-7 depicts the return as distant.

As the last eighth-century writing in the Book of the Twelve, Micah foreshadows the major themes of the next three writings for the reader of the Book of the Twelve. Micah lays the groundwork for the Assyrian threat (5:5-6; 7:8-10; read with 1:1), which is the subject of Nahum. The implications of Nineveh's downfall for Zion (in Nah 1:15) are also noted for the reader (Mic 7:8-10). Micah also anticipates Habakkuk. The situation of Judah as described in Micah 6:1-7:7 is essentially the same when the Book of the Twelve next describes the status of Judah in Habakkuk 1:2-4. Micah anticipates Zephaniah as well. The promise of Micah 4:6-7 is reconstituted in Zephaniah 3:18-20, and a thematic parallel to Micah 7:14-17 reappears in Zephaniah 3:14-17.

As the midpoint of the Book of the Twelve, Micah 4-5 plays a significant role by rehearsing many of the themes of the Twelve. A Masoretic note beside 3:12 (the last verse of the chapter) signals that 3:12 is the halfway point of the Book of the Twelve by verse count. Micah 4 thus begins the second half of the Book of the Twelve, making these chapters a propitious place to reflect upon the "future" and recurring themes. The role of the nations appears in various contexts of judgment (as enemies of YHWH and/or Judah) and promise (peace when they recognize YHWH as in 4:1-4). Unlike Joel 4 or Zechariah 14, the nations in Micah 4-5 do not appear as the object of eschatological judgment; nor is there *specific* mention of the day of YHWH, as one finds in Joel, Obadiah, and Zechariah 14. Still, the idea of a time of divine inter-

vention to bring about restoration of Judah comes close to the day of YHWH concept, especially when the framing devices of these chapters use eschatological formulas that speak of this future time as “on that day” (4:6; 5:10) and “in days to come” (4:1).

There are two *specific* nations (Assyria and Babylon) mentioned in Micah 4–5, but the oracles that mention these countries reflect upon historical developments of foreign occupation of the land in the seventh and sixth centuries. Assyria also plays an implicit role in 1:8–16 as the nation threatening the western part of Judah. Assyria and Babylon are specifically mentioned as hostile powers in Micah 4–5.

By contrast, “the nations” in *general* receive both positive and negative treatment. They will ultimately be at peace with Judah and with YHWH according to Micah 4:1–4. This passage contains a parallel to Isaiah 2:2–4 and reverses the imagery found in Joel 4:9–10. Immediately after the midpoint of the Book of the Twelve (Mic 3:12), 4:1–4 jumps to the future by referring to “the days to come” (4:1). The passage expects the nations to recognize the rule of YHWH (4:3), even if they are not yet able to follow him (4:5). This attitude of peace also connotes considerable separation in that (when compared with the parallel text of Isa 2:2–4) Micah 4:5 implies separate paths for the nations and for Judah, even though neither will be a threat to the other.

More negative assumptions about the nations appear in Micah 4–7. The nations threaten to attack Jerusalem (4:11; 5:7–8), though they will not ultimately prevail: Zion will fight back and defeat them (4:13); YHWH will put them in their place (5:15); and they will cower before YHWH (7:16). These variations do not represent an apocalyptic judgment but a reversal of fortunes for Judah. In this respect, they convey a step on the way toward portrayals of the judgment against the nations like those in Joel 4 or Zechariah 14. The nations have been hostile to Judah, and for that they will be punished, but there is no clear indication that the text of Micah 4–5 presumes a full apocalyptic judgment on the nations. The fear motif, in particular, appears reminiscent of the nations’ fear before YHWH’s power that one finds in the conquest stories (Josh 2:9, 24; 5:1; 9:24; 10:6–11; see also the futile resistance of ethnic groups in Josh 3:10; 9:1; 11:3).

In addition to the Twelve, Micah also intersects with Jeremiah and Isaiah. Micah is one of the few prophets mentioned in another

prophetic writing. His prophecy of destruction (3:12) is cited in Jeremiah 26:18 by Jeremiah's allies to restrain king Jehoiakim from killing Jeremiah. That narrative presumes knowledge of 3:12 had been preserved for nearly a century. The actual quote in Jeremiah 26:18 deviates little from Micah 3:12, but the introduction to the saying in Jeremiah 26:18 differs significantly from the beginning of Micah 3:12. The Jeremiah introduction ("Thus says YHWH of Hosts") is common in Jeremiah (appearing fifty times), but it never occurs in Micah. The shorter form of the messenger formula ("Thus says YHWH") appears only twice in Micah (2:3; 3:5), but it is far more common in Jeremiah (110 times). This data suggests that Micah's introduction ("therefore on your account") was adapted for the book of Jeremiah.

Micah 4:1-4 contains a striking parallel to Isaiah 2:2-4, but the end of the parallel exhibits a decidedly different theological slant than the Isaiah passage. Micah 4:5 largely undercuts the radical openness to the nations in Isaiah 2:2-4, since Micah 4:5 implies the nations and Judah will remain separate, each serving their own god. By contrast, Isaiah 2:2-4 offers no such qualification, since the nations' pilgrimage in Isaiah 2:2 (= Mic 4:1) implies those nations recognize YHWH. Thus, unlike the use of Micah 3:12 in Jeremiah 26:18, Micah 4:1-4 appears to borrow from Isaiah, even while adapting it.

NOTES

1. So, for example, Juan I. Alaro, *Micah* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 3-4. Alaro states, "the contents, language, and style of the prophecy suggest that Micah was something more than a farmer or poor citizen from a small village. He was a theologian who had cast his lot with the poor of the land and had become a fearless defender of the rights of the oppressed" (4).

2. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Micah* (AB 24E; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 17-20.

3. Jörg Jeremias, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jonah, Micha* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 24/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) 114-17.

4. The *combination* of these traditions suggests a vantage point much later than the eighth-century prophet. The combination suggests awareness of the Deuteronomistic History and traditions associated with material in Numbers that are used to reflect upon the destruction of Jerusalem. In this sense, this passage can hardly predate the exile.

5. Jeremias, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jonah, Micha*, 120.

6. James D. Nogalski, "Micah 7:8-20: Re-evaluating the Identity of the Enemy," in Randall Heskett and Brian Irwin, *The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions*, (The Library of Hebrew Bible/OTS 469; New York: Continuum, 2010) 125–42.

7. See the discussion of Mic 7:11-13 in the commentary concerning the ambiguity of 7:12.

OUTLINE OF MICAH

- I. Micah 1:1-16: YHWH Judges Samaria and Jerusalem
 - A. 1:1: Superscription
 - B. 1:2-7: Trial and Verdict
 - C. 1:8-16: Implications for Judah and Jerusalem
- II. Micah 2:1-13: Confrontation, Accusation, and Promise
 - A. 2:1-5: The Greedy Forfeit Their Inheritance
 - B. 2:6-11: You Get the Message You Deserve
 - C. 2:12-13: A Remnant May Survive
- III. Micah 3:1-12: The Failure of Rulers, Prophets, and Priests
 - A. 3:1-4: Your Leaders Devour You
 - B. 3:5-8: The Prophets Mislead You
 - C. 3:9-12: Your Fate Awaits You
- IV. Micah 4:1–5:15 (MT 4:1–5:14): What the Future Holds
 - A. 4:1-7: Peace for Zion and the Remnant in the Latter Days
 - B. 4:8–5:4 (MT 4:8–5:3): But What about “Now”?
 - C. 5:5-9 (MT 5:4-8): “And It Shall Be”
 - D. 5:10-15 (MT 5:9-14): YHWH Will Cut Off the Nations
- V. Micah 6:1–7:7: Trial, Verdict, and Response
 - A. 6:1-5: YHWH Convenes a Trial
 - B. 6:6-8: Prophetic Reminder of YHWH’s Expectations
 - C. 6:9-16: Two Accusations and Verdicts
 - D. 7:1-7: The Prophet Laments the State of the Country
- VI. Micah 7:8-20: Call for a Reprieve as in the Days of Old
 - A. 7:8-10: Lady Zion and Lady Nineveh
 - B. 7:11-13: Zion’s Reprieve and Judgment
 - C. 7:14-15: Prophetic Prayer of Intercession and YHWH’s Brief Response
 - D. 7:16-17: The Prophet Addresses the People
 - E. 7:18-20: The Past as Promise for the Present

YHWH JUDGES SAMARIA AND JERUSALEM

Micah 1:1-16

COMMENTARY

Micah 1:1-16 contains three units (1:1, 2-7, 8-16) woven together rhetorically to focus upon the threatened destruction of Jerusalem. The first, 1:1, is a superscription whose titular function for the book not only sets it apart syntactically from the remaining units of the chapter but also provides the context in which the book is to be read. Micah 1:2-7 reads like a courtroom drama with a summons, a statement of the charges, and a pronouncement of the verdict against Samaria and Jerusalem. The middle section, 1:3-4, essentially describes the arrival of YHWH as the judge, jury, and executioner. Micah 1:8-16 focuses on the implications of the judgment using a prophetic lamentation (1:8-9) followed by warnings to a series of villages in the Shephelah. These warnings imply a serious threat to Jerusalem and Judah (1:10-16).

Superscription, 1:1

Micah 1:1 invites the reader to imagine Micah's prophecy against the backdrop of three kings of Judah in the latter part of the eighth century: Jotham (756–741), Ahaz (742–725), and Hezekiah (725–696). These three kings are also mentioned in Hosea 1:1 and help link the superscriptions of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah—four of the six writings in the Book of the Twelve that provide chronological elements in their superscriptions (see Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1). The prophet's home, Moresheth (presumably the same town called Moresheth-Gath in 1:14), was a small village about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem.

According to 1:1, the prophetic pronouncements in Micah address the capital cities of the northern and southern kingdoms, Samaria

and Jerusalem respectively. However, Samaria appears only in 1:5-7, and then only to warn to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. In this context, then, 1:1 sets the stage for the destruction of Samaria (722 BCE) and the Assyrian threat to Judah and Jerusalem that culminates in the siege of Sennacherib (701 BCE).

Trial and Verdict, 1:2-7

The second unit (1:2-7) begins with what amounts to a legal summons writ large (1:2). The earth and its inhabitants are called to attention as YHWH arrives from his holy habitation to testify and to act (see [Lawsuit *rib*] in Hos 4:1-6, [The Lawsuit (*rib*) in Hosea 5:1-7]; and Mic 6:1-5). This summons and pronouncement of YHWH's arrival evokes a somber tone since prophetic theophanies generally

lead to pronouncements of judgment against someone.

[Theophany in Prophetic Literature]

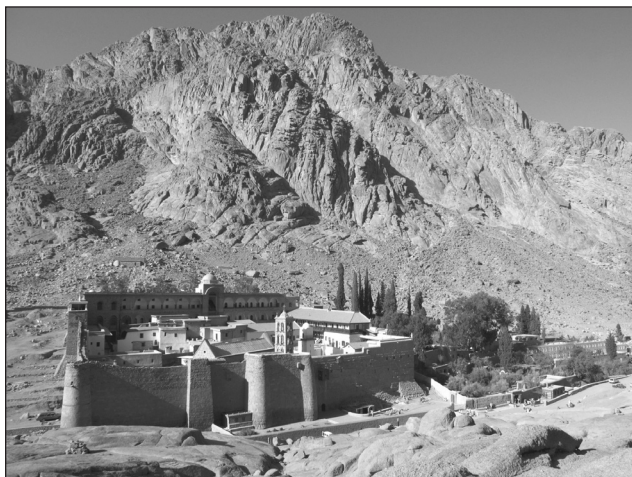
The theophany in Micah 1:3-4 reminds the reader of the similar poetic theophany that begins Amos (1:2).¹ The theophany depiction begins by using anthropomorphic images to portray the devastating consequences of YHWH's arrival. YHWH, whose presence is too large for the earth to hold, nevertheless enters its space and tramples across the "high places." The high places refer to the mountains in 1:3, as evidenced by the continuation of the portrayal in 1:4 (but see 1:5).

The weight of YHWH's presence causes the mountains to crumble as YHWH enters the realm of human habitation, violently leveling the mountains and bursting open the valleys. This imagery conveys a

Theophany in Prophetic Literature



The word "theophany" derives from two Greek words meaning the appearance of God. Traditions of God's manifestation take various forms in Old Testament texts, with most drawing on powerful images from nature in the form of lightning, thunder, and clouds (especially in the Sinai tradition). In prophetic literature, metaphors of God as king and warrior also lie behind theophany portrayals. Sometimes, as in Hab 3, warrior motifs play off the ancient Canaanite creation myths to depict YHWH as a powerful warrior against whom the forces of chaos stand little chance (see "Baal Worship" in Hos 2). In Mic 1:2-4 (as with Amos 1:2), the portrayal of YHWH's appearance is used to warn YHWH's own people about the serious nature of their actions that stirred the wrath of their righteous God. As in the image here, the rock formations of the mountain regions in the Sinai Peninsula accentuate the shadows between outcroppings and present a foreboding picture that undoubtedly added to the mystique of the mountain.



Joonas Plaan, Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. (Credit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Catherine_Sinai.jpg)

frightening situation in which the land is unable to withstand God's presence. This scenario introduces YHWH as a power so formidable that any human resistance would simply be overwhelmed. God is portrayed as coming to earth for judgment. The only response to this portrayal of God is fear. The only question to resolve is against whom Yahweh will act.

Micah 1:5 begins to explain the target of YHWH's ominous arrival. YHWH's judgment is directed against YHWH's own people because of the transgression of Jacob. The word *peša'* means a deliberate decision to disobey, to rebel against prescribed limits. In this context, Jacob refers to Israel since its transgression is listed as "Samaria," the capital of the northern kingdom from the time of Ahab until the destruction of the city and the kingdom in 722 BCE.

Micah 1:5 uses a series of parallel terms and rhetorical questions to accuse both Samaria and Jerusalem of rebellion and sin against YHWH. The logic of these parallel expressions lays out the accusations as follows:

rebellion of Jacob + sins of the house of Israel = the reasons for
YHWH's arrival
rebellion of Jacob = Samaria
high places of Judah = Jerusalem

These terms are contextually relevant and pivotal for understanding the focus of Micah 1–3. In 1:3, YHWH treads upon the high places of the earth, and they cannot withstand his presence. The devastation of the high places is, according to 1:5 ("because of all this"), grounded in the rebellion of Jacob (= Samaria), implying YHWH has left his holy habitation to bring judgment against Samaria. Similarly, the second rhetorical question—"What is the high place of Judah?"—functions as a threat against Judah because its capital, Jerusalem, is the answer.

As the remainder of the verses unfold in this unit and beyond, it becomes clear that the theophany is intended to explain the destruction of Samaria as the punishment of YHWH and simultaneously to function as a warning to Jerusalem. Samaria's destruction is described more specifically (1:6-7), but its crimes have found their way to Judah (1:9).

This is an odd way for a book to begin. It presumes that the reader knows *why* Samaria has been destroyed by YHWH. It pre-

sumes the reader has knowledge of Israel's destruction from some other context. Only two other places in biblical literature can account for such knowledge: the book of Kings and the prophetic writings of Hosea and Amos. Thus, this passage assumes information from the Deuteronomistic History and/or the Book of the Twelve.

The NRSV treats 1:6 as the verdict in a judgment oracle introduced by the word “therefore,” even though the word does not appear in the Hebrew text. English translations also presume that 1:6 introduces a future action of YHWH that constitutes the culmination of the theophany.

High Places Made Low



This passage plays on the imagery of high places to demonstrate YHWH's power. The word for high place (*bâmâh*) appears regularly in association with illicit cult worship. The sites used are called “high places.” Earlier assumptions about this term usually assumed a literal hilltop sanctuary was intended. However, recent archaeological excavations have suggested a more plausible referent since several sites have revealed the presence of raised platforms that could have been used as the location for illicit cultic practices. The picture here shows such a raised platform at Dan. The use of the term “high places” in Mic 1:2-7, however, indicates three different meanings of the term. In 1:3, the high places are the mountains. YHWH steps on the high places of the earth and they crumble to nothing. In 1:5, the high place of Judah is identified as Jerusalem, which helps convey an accusation since the high places are also known as the places where idolatry is practiced. In Mic 1:6, Samaria becomes nothing more than a mound in the forest, even though it had been the site where idolatry was practiced (1:7). Thus, rhetorically, if Samaria (the high place of the northern kingdom) is destroyed, there is little hope for the high place of Judah. This movement is even more pronounced in Mic 3:12, where Jerusalem itself becomes a “high place” of the forest, a bump in the ground, using the same word as 1:3, 5.



A cult place behind the gate of the fortification of Tel Dan was probably built by King Jeroboam of Israel in the 10th C. BCE. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

However, rhetorically, this judgment against Samaria serves only as a connecting point on the way to Jerusalem. While 1:6-7a graphically depicts YHWH's devastation of Samaria, the larger unit focuses on the implications for Judah. In other words, Samaria's destruction serves as a warning that God's anger and devastating wrath will be visited upon Jerusalem.

Micah 1:6-7 focuses on the physical destruction of Samaria and its idols without even mentioning the people. The consequences of Samaria's destruction will be as though the city never existed (1:6). The place where Samaria stood will be nothing more than a mound of rubble in the forest. [High Places Made Low] With this imagery, YHWH clears the site like a farmer clearing the land. The rocks are removed, and the foundation is laid bare so that the ground is ready to be

planted again. Micah 1:7 gives special attention to the idols in the city that represent the abomination of the worship of other gods (breaking the first two commandments). Samaria is personified as a prostitute who sold herself to other lovers, a metaphor reminiscent of the charges laid against the land in Hosea 2 (Hos 2:5, 12 [MT 2:7, 14]). (See [\[Meanings of "Prostitute"\]](#) in Hos 1.)

Implications for Judah and Jerusalem, 1:8-16

The third unit of this chapter explores the implications of YHWH's appearance. Micah 1:8 begins with a transitional element that relates back to the previous verses ("because of this"), but it also changes the speaker from YHWH to the prophet. Thus, Micah 1:8 provides the prophet's response to the message of judgment against Samaria. In short, 1:8 depicts the prophet mourning the imminent demise of Samaria, but more importantly using Samaria's demise as a warning to Jerusalem. The phrasing of the NRSV suggests a mortal blow has been struck against Samaria ("her wound is incurable"), but the symbolic act of the prophet conveys the implications for Jerusalem and Judah. Assuming that readers would have associated this passage with the events of 722, this warning has geographic and theological implications. Geographically, Samaria is close to Jerusalem. Assyrian control of Samaria, and with it the entire northern kingdom, means Assyrian hegemony has reached the borders of Judah. Theologically, too, the depiction of Samaria as a prostitute who has sold herself to other lovers (1:7) also functions as a warning to Jerusalem that she will suffer the same fate if she does not change.

Micah 1:10-12 lists six towns, most of which are not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament (Beth-Leaphrah, Shaphir, Beth-Ezel, Maroth). Nevertheless, the consensus among scholars is that these villages did actually exist in the eighth century, either in the Shephelah of Judah or in Philistine territory. In either case, they would likely have been found near the route taken by Sennacherib to Jerusalem. The five towns mentioned in 1:13-16 are more readily located and are also closer to Jerusalem. The point, therefore, would be to portray the impending threat against Jerusalem in the time of Micah. Since the superscription (1:1) mentions Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, this time frame could easily be imagined as the time from the destruction of Samaria (722) to the siege of

Cities and Towns in Micah 1:8-16

The places mentioned in Mic 1:8-16 illustrate a concern for the region west and south of Jerusalem, which is consistent with Micah's hometown (Moresheh in 1:1 and more narrowly located as Moresheh-Gath in 1:14 as a daughter-village of Gath). It lies in a region that borders Philistine territory and was often disputed territory.



Sennacherib (701), since all three kings predate both events and Hezekiah was still ruling during Sennacherib's siege.

The threats against these eleven towns, while artistically conveyed using paronomasia, have a cumulative effect. As part of the state fortifications, these small villages and cities played a vital role in protecting Jerusalem and the king. If these cities were to fall as an enemy marched toward Jerusalem, Jerusalem itself, and with it the state of Judah, would be in grave danger. Micah 1:15-16 hints at this threat by suggesting the king will flee ("the glory of Israel shall go to Adullam"—the place that held the cave where David fled from Saul [1 Sam 22:1]).

Additionally, in the final state-

ment at the end of the litany of threats to these cities, the prophet pronounces to Zion that her children have all been exiled.

"Daughter Zion" appears in Micah 1:13 for the first time in Book of the Twelve. [\[Lady Zion in Micah 1\]](#) She is also mentioned in Micah 4:8, 10, 13, and has a major speaking role in the liturgy of 7:8-20. "Daughter" is a title of respect, much like "lady," and the term allows Jerusalem to be personified as the great lady married to YHWH, whose children (= inhabitants) are either blessed or cursed according to the context. In the final form of Micah 1:2-16, Lady Zion serves as the symbol of the land of Judah in its entirety. It is Lady Zion who is commanded to provide parting gifts (1:14), who will experience the arrival of a conqueror (1:15), and who will respond by shaving her head because her children have been exiled (1:16). In this sense, she is mother of all the villages of Judah, not merely the inhabitants within her walls.

Lachish was a major city in the Shephelah, located about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. A major fortified city in the late

eight century, it was among those towns conquered by Sennacherib on his way to lay siege to Jerusalem.

In 1:14, Moresheth-Gath is the hometown of the prophet (1:1). It is generally considered a satellite village of Philistine Gath, though Moresheth-Gath was a Judean city in Micah's time. The command to provide parting gifts to the village reflects a complex play on words. The word "Moresheth" sounds similar to a rare word for "desire" (*'ērešet*, see Ps 21:3). The idea of a place of "desire" receiving parting gifts is more ominous, since cities are not in the habit of departing. The implications thus derive from the threats already pronounced and from the culmination of this passage in 1:16, where exile for the people of Judah becomes explicit.

Achzib is a village not far from Lachish. The pun on this village plays off the sound of its name (*'akzîb*) and the Hebrew word for "deception" (*akzāb*). Mareshah, a village only four miles from Lachish, would also experience the devastation wrought by the arrival of Sennacherib. The pun on this word is a complex play on the name of the town and the Hebrew word for "the conqueror." [Village Names and Word Plays] The threat becomes clearer with this reference to a conqueror than the previous verse referring to parting gifts.

Adullam is another village in the Shephelah, fifteen to sixteen miles southwest of Jerusalem. The pun on this village plays on the meaning of the name of the village, "refuge," and on its role in the story of David. David hid in a cave near the village while fleeing

Lady Zion in Micah 1



The term "daughter Zion" refers to the personified city. She appears frequently in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Twelve as a character in prophetic speeches. Three roughly synonymous terms refer to her: Daughter Zion (Isa 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; Jer 4:31; 6:2, 23; Mic 4:8, 10, 13; Zeph 3:14; Zech 2:14; 9:9); Daughter of My People (Isa 22:4; Jer 4:11; 6:26; 8:11, 19, 21ff; 9:6; 14:17); and Daughter Jerusalem (Isa 37:22; Zeph 3:14; Zech 9:9). Ezekiel uses the personification of Jerusalem in several passages, but does not use the term (see especially Ezekiel 16; 23). Similarly, personified Lady Zion can be the subject of YHWH's wrath—usually because she is accused of being unfaithful to her husband (e.g., Jer 2–4). She can also be the subject of promises from YHWH—usually that her beauty will be restored and her children (= Jerusalem's inhabitants) will return (see Isa 49:14-26; 60–62). Personification of cities as the consorts of deities or city goddesses has a long history, showing up in iconography as well as texts, as evidenced by first-century Phoenician coins with Tyche (Virtue), or the Roman Period mosaic at Beth-Shean (shown here) where the lady's crown is a depiction of the city itself.



A mosaic showing Tyche, goddess of fortune, from the semi-circular exedra off Paladius Street. Beth Shean (Scythopolis), Israel. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

Destruction of Lachish

The horrors of war as portrayed by the Assyrians can be seen in the Assyrian depiction of the overthrow of Lachish. Pictures of this battle hung in the palace of Sennacherib from the early seventh century.

The assault on the gate tower of Lachish. An Assyrian siege machine can be seen on the left. Late Assyrian c. 701 BCE. (Credit: Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)



Assyrian warriors impaling Jewish prisoners after conquering the Jewish fortress of Lachish in 701 BCE. Part of a relief from the palace of Sennacherib, Nineveh, Mesopotamia (Iraq). Assyrian, 8th C. BCE. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

from Saul (1 Sam 22:1), and when Micah 1:15 satirically refers to “the glory of Israel” coming to Adullam, the double entendre is hard to miss. The “glory of Israel” invokes the image of David hiding in a cave in order to imply that the current king will also need to flee.

Micah 1:16 uses feminine *singular* commands (make yourself bald; cut off your hair), a fact not reflected in the plural pronouns of NRSV and NIV (see NAS, which at least uses the singular). English translations alone cannot convey the change of gender since English pronouns are not gender specific in the second person. This feminine entity who is addressed and told to do these things can be none other than Lady Zion, Jerusalem personified (see 1:13). The commands that she shave her hair presume this action demonstrates mourning or lamentation over the loss of

the cities (Isa 3:24; 15:2; Jer 47:5; 48:37; Ezek 7:18; 27:3).

The cumulative effect of the combination of 1:2-7 and 1:8-16 creates a somewhat confusing scenario. On the one hand, the imminent destruction of Samaria as a warning to Jerusalem (1:2-7) draws on the reader’s knowledge of events prior to 722 (when Samaria was destroyed), as presented in Hosea, Amos, and 2 Kings 17. On the other hand, the threats to the towns in the Shephelah (1:8-16) make more sense as an allusion to the events of 701, the siege of Sennacherib, yet these two events are separated by twenty years. It is hard to imagine a single military campaign that would

Village Names and Word Plays

ΑΩ The names of the villages that appear in two groups (1:10-12, 14-15) reflect artistic and geographical considerations. The village names involve puns (i.e., paronomasia) on either the meaning of the village name or the sound somewhere in the prophetic declaration associated with the village.

Town Name	Type*	Explanation/Meaning
Gath (1:10)	1	<i>bēgat</i> 'al-tagḡîdû (tell it not in Gath) inverts the sound gat/tag.
Beth-leaphrah	2	"House of dust" should "roll in the dust" (1:10). "Roll" (<i>hitpallāštî</i>) has the same consonants as Philistia.
Shaphir (1:11)	2	"Graceful" is disgraced with nakedness and shame.
Zaanan	1	<i>lō' yās 'āh yōšebet sa'ānān</i> (inhabitants of Zanaan, do not go forth) plays on sound.
Beth-ezel	2	"House of withdrawal" will have its support withdrawn.
Maroth (1:12)	2	"Bitterness" waits for good but gets disaster.
Lachish (1:13)	1	Bind the chariot to the steed (<i>lārekeš</i>), inhabitant of Lachish.
Moresbeth-Gath (1:14)	1	Departing gifts are given to the place of "desire." The word plays on <i>ěrešet</i> (desire) with the sound in Moresbeth.
Achzib	1	<i>bātē 'akzīb lē 'akzāb</i> (the houses of Achzib become deception).
Mareshah (1:15)	1	I will again bring a conqueror (<i>hayyōrēš</i>) upon you, "inhabitant of Mareshah" (<i>yōšebet mārēšāh</i>).
Adullam	2	The name "refuge" is the place where David fled, and where his descendant ("the glory of YHWH") will flee.

*1 = Word play involves assonance with prophetic statement (cf. underlined sounds with the name of the town)

2 = Word play (also) involves meaning of town's name

start with an attack against Samaria and then bypass Jerusalem in order to attack the Shephelah, only to return to Jerusalem. Strategically, such a plan makes little sense. However, what makes these two sections difficult chronologically and geographically is precisely what holds them together theologically—namely, the threat that the consolidation of Assyrian power created for the state of Judah. In the mind of the Judean author—or, more likely, the editor(s) who brought this material into its final form—chronology and geography were trumped by theology. The events at the end of eighth century, when seen theologically, threatened first Samaria, then Jerusalem and Judah with destruction. These events were interpreted as punishment from YHWH and as warnings to Jerusalem's leaders of their need to worship YHWH and YHWH only.

CONNECTIONS

Micah presumes the interconnectedness of Samaria's destruction and Judah's fate. The final form of Micah 1:2-16 implies that the destruction of Samaria is merely the first step of a process whereby YHWH's wrath will envelop Israel *and* Judah. The announcement of Samaria's destruction should cause fear for all the cities of Judah, up to and including Jerusalem, home of the king and the temple. Moreover, the reason for the shared fate (according to the final form of Mic 1:2-16) is that both Samaria and Jerusalem share the guilt of idol worship (1:5, 7, 12-13). Samaria's guilt, described with the language of Hosea, is transferred to Jerusalem. Micah conveys no double standard. Because Jerusalem has betrayed its God by worshiping idols, Micah envisions the same punishment befalling Jerusalem and Judah that befell Samaria and Israel.

Such is also the message of the Deuteronomistic History. [Deuteronomistic History] In 2 Kings 17:7-13, the destruction of Samaria

Deuteronomistic History



This term describes the four books also known as the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Samuel and Kings were not divided into two books each until the Middle Ages in Hebrew textual tradition. The term Deuteronomistic History, however, implies that these books present a continuous narrative about the history of the kingdom (from its founding to its destruction), told in light of the theology and phrasing of the book of Deuteronomy. These four books appear in order in the Hebrew Bible, though in English order (following the Septuagint), the book of Ruth was inserted between Judges and Samuel. Such facile statements are misleading and theologically suspect, especially since the French Quarter (surely the symbol of the behavior to which these quotes refer) largely escaped the ravages of the flood. Would God's aim be that indiscriminate?

resulted, among other things, from building high places and serving idols (17:9, 12; cf. Mic 1:5, 7). YHWH warned Israel and Judah against these practices (17:13). In the eyes of the Deuteronomistic Historian, who is theologizing about the destruction of Samaria, the fact that Judah failed to heed these warnings, even after Samaria's destruction, foreshadows a threat against Jerusalem (17:19). Thus, the message of 2 Kings 17 parallels the message of Micah 1. As a jealous God, YHWH expects exclusive worship and abhors idolatry. Fidelity is the core of the covenant agreement instituted by YHWH and accepted by Israel (Exod 20:1-2).

What do such accusations mean for persons of faith in a post-9/11 and post-Hurricane Katrina world? [Accusing God; Blaming Humans] On the one

hand, some religious leaders today see the hand of God in every disaster, whether the disaster results from human action or from some catastrophic natural phenomenon. For these people, disaster proves that God has been provoked into acting against those whom these leaders consider to be the enemy. These leaders work from a classic "us against them" paradigm. On the other hand, there are people today who ascribe disaster to divine action when advances

in science and human understanding cause most to see natural forces differently. Most people of faith find themselves instinctively somewhere in between these two poles. We see acts of terrorism conducted in the name of religion as aberrations of religious systems. We see the destructive natural phenomena as unavoidable realities in the fabric of how this world operates. Our default images of God tend to be positive, loving, and gentle. Yet biblical theophanies in prophetic literature play an important role in the structure of several biblical books as warnings that divine wrath is imminent.

The theophanies that begin Amos and Micah pronounce divine judgment on God's own people, not against enemies. In contrast to those who see calamity in the modern world as God's judgment against "my enemies," these pronouncements function against "us" rather than "them." However, in contrast to those who think God is irrelevant, these powerful images threaten judgment of monumental, even cosmic, proportions. Such warnings are hard to dismiss for people of faith in traditions where biblical texts function as starting points for theological reflection.

Two observations can guide one's reflection upon theophanies and texts that use them. First, while theophanies typically portray the coming of God in wrath, these texts do not portray God coming unannounced. Theophanies assume that God arrives in wrath because wickedness prevails and because previous attempts to change behavior have failed. God does not just get up on the wrong side of bed, but appears in order to set something right. Second, theophanies tend to appear in contexts pronouncing judgment against the powerful and the wealthy, not to perpetuate the status quo. In both Amos and Micah, a major portion of the accusations is directed against people of means whose actions are controlled by arrogance, concupiscence, and hubris. As a result, they choose not to see the suffering of those around them, and they

Accusing God; Blaming Humans



Large natural disasters can cause theological reflection on the role of suffering and calamity.

The horrific disaster of Hurricane Katrina will not soon be forgotten. In its wake, many Americans questioned the larger meaning of the suffering and destruction wrought by the storm. In private and public conversations, Americans pondered whether those killed or left homeless by Katrina were simply unlucky, needless victims of a failed emergency system, or part of a larger atonement of the sins of our culture. Believers naturally contemplated the religious meaning of the massive destruction, and in the first days after Katrina hit, some commentators were quick to point out the fact that the city of New Orleans had borne the brunt of the damage. In a column he distributed to local news outlets, Alabama State Senator Hank Erwin wrote, "New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin and wickedness. . . . It is the kind of behavior that ultimately brings the judgment of God." Pat Robertson also described New Orleans as a mecca of partying and other excesses that dramatically—and, in his opinion, appropriately—incur God's anger.

Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *Four Gods: What We Say about God and What that Says about Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 27.

"Senator: Katrina was God's wrath," Associated Press, *Decatur Daily News*, 29 September 2005.

turn their backs on God unless they think God is useful to them. Micah 1:2-7 assumes that the judgment against Samaria is justified and does not come as a surprise. Further, this text continues by demanding that Jerusalem and all of Judah take notice.

Choices have consequences. Ignoring the poor so that we might acquire more wealth creates injustice that runs contrary to the will of God for humanity. Worshiping idols means serving the things that masquerade as gods. These are the charges leveled against God's people in Hosea, Amos, and Micah: a lack of concern for social justice and idolatry. Is it any surprise that, when asked by a lawyer to tell him the most important commandment (Matt 22:34-40), Jesus answered with two? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And "Love your neighbor as yourself." These two commands represent the foundation upon which the law and the prophets rest: the love of God and the love of people.

NOTE

1. Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary* (trans. Gary Stansell; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 51. Wolff ascribes this theophany to the same redactional hand, an exilic redactor in Judah associated with the Deuteronomistic movement.

CONFRONTATION, ACCUSATION, AND PROMISE

Micah 2:1-13

COMMENTARY

Scholars have largely reached a consensus that Micah 2:1-13 divides into three sections: a woe and judgment oracle (2:1-5); a disputation (2:6-11); and a promise to a remnant (2:12-13). The agreement is ironic, however, because interpretive problems make this chapter one of the more difficult in the Book of the Twelve to decipher with any precision. Each unit poses difficulties that make any consensus regarding the meaning of the passage unlikely.

The Greedy Forfeit Their Inheritance, 2:1-5

Micah 2:1 begins like a woe oracle, marked characteristically by the word “alas, woe” (*hōy*) plus a participle indicating the group to whom the oracle is addressed (see [\[Woe Oracle\]](#) in Amos 5). However, the remainder of 2:1-5 functions more like a judgment oracle. It describes the situation using accusations followed by a pronouncement of judgment, introduced by “therefore” and the messenger formula (“thus says YHWH”) in 2:3.

Internal markers in Micah 2:1-5 indicate changing speakers. The prophet begins the speech with accusations against an unnamed group (2:1-2). In 2:3, the style changes to divine first-person speech; but in 2:4-5, third-person references to YHWH and first common plural language suggest the prophetic speaker amplifies 2:3 by quoting a lament. This quoted lament continues through the end of 2:4, but some interpreters include 2:5 as well. For others, 2:5 offers a prophetic summary of the implications of the lament. [\[Views of Micah 2:5\]](#)

The woe oracle in 2:1 confronts a group whose plan the prophet pronounces as wicked. They plot at night and execute their plan

Views of Micah 2:5

ΑΩ The NRSV stops the lament with 2:4. Wolff argues that 2:5 is a redactional interpolation that reflects upon the lament with language from the land allotment sections of Joshua. Sweeney, however, treats 2:4 and 2:5 as part of the taunt song.


Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah* (trans. Gary Stansell; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress) 80.

Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 361.

when daylight arrives. Thus, the prophet speaks not of random crimes but of systematic plans with evil intentions. Micah 2:2 lays out specific accusations using parallel images. It depicts a process of oppression that begins with the desire for someone else's field and concludes with the procurement of the property by less than honorable means. This group covets fields and houses, and then they take them. They oppress landowner and citizen, taking their homes and their property.

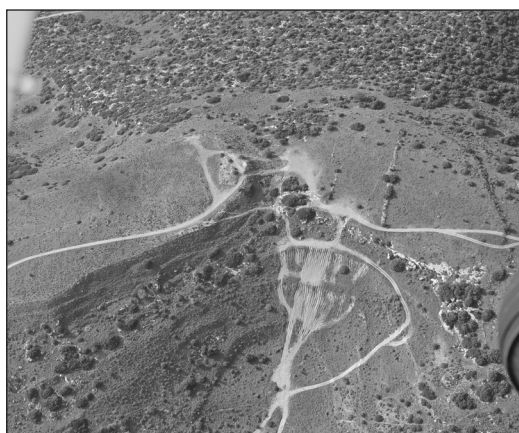
Who comprises the group that the prophet condemns in 2:1-2? Are they wealthy landowners in Judah, or do these verses presume foreign occupiers? While some would disagree, the language seems more consistent with accusations against a group within Judah. The language used to condemn this activity involves no explicit military images, and it seems to presume an ongoing process whereby the perpetrators develop plans while others sleep and forcibly implement those plans as they have opportunity. At its core, the prophet's charges condemn the greed and the lust for power, property, and wealth that motivate these individuals. [\[Economy at the Time of Micah\]](#)

Economy at the Time of Micah

 Assuming this passage reflects the situation at the end of the eighth century in the time of Micah, one should note how the situation differs from that presumed in Hosea and Amos (see discussion of the date of those prophets in the introductory matter of those writings in volume 1 of this commentary). The economic situation at the end of the eighth century appears to have deteriorated greatly from that presumed in Amos, and it lacks the political instability of the situations in comparison to the early material in Hosea. Micah's condemnation of Judeans who take advantage of their fellow citizens is not unlike some of the polemical charges in Amos, but the oppression in Micah does not focus on the decadence of the wealthy to the same degree as one finds in Amos (cf. Amos 4:1; 5:12; 6:4-7). Despite these different assumptions regarding the economic conditions, the early material in both prophets condemn the wanton disregard for the poor. In Amos, the wealthy are depicted as feeling entitled, while Micah focuses more on the aggressive behavior of those who take economic advantage of others. Part of this economic scenario undoubtedly derived from the large influx of refugees who fled south after the destruction of Samaria in 722. However, one cannot disregard the extent to which Micah's background as a landowner in the Judean countryside also colored the way he assessed practices of seizing land described in 2:1-2.

Aerial photo of Morosheth-gath, Micah's home. Micah deplored the exploitation of family-owned farms by the wealthy and powerful. As the photograph shows, the land was verdant, fertile, and desirable by those who could take advantage of the depressed economic situation.

(Credit: Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com)



Micah 2:3 sounds an ominous note as it transitions from the accusations of 2:1-2 to the pronouncement of judgment. In Micah 2:3, “therefore” marks the point where the pronouncement of judgment occurs. YHWH announces the devising of plans for judgment from which the group mentioned in 2:1 cannot escape. This first draws a parallel, verbally, to 2:1 where those whom the prophet confronts are called “those who devise wickedness and evil on their beds,” while 2:3 speaks of YHWH “devising evil against this family.” Thus, this verse presumes a cause-and-effect theology. In 2:1, those with the power and the means to take what does not belong to them plot against those who are weaker than they are. In 2:3, the powerful become the powerless because they have acted against the will of YHWH. The words of the prophet leave no doubt who will prevail when YHWH acts. Micah 2:3 also utilizes the language of Amos 5:13 to intimate that this judgment parallels the judgment of Israel in Amos. [Micah 2:3 and Amos 5:13]

Those who have acted out of greed and the lust for power will be humbled. In this respect, Micah 2:3 already anticipates a prominent motif in 6:8, where the expectations of YHWH are clearly articulated: “He has told you, mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and *to walk humbly with your God?*” Those who do not walk humbly with God will be humbled by God.

Micah 2:4 begins with the transitional formula, “on that day.” More often than not in the Book of the Twelve, this formula introduces a word of hope, but such is not the case in 2:4. In fact, this verse adds insult to injury by citing a taunt song placed in the mouths of unnamed enemies. This taunt adds a second stage to the punishment of 2:3 since the cries of those being punished consist of lamentation in response to disaster, calamity, and death.

Micah 2:3 and Amos 5:13



Mic 2:3 contains a direct quote from Amos 5:13. Numerous commentators have suggested that the phrase “for it is an evil time” in Mic 2:3 is a later addition from an editor wanting to draw attention to the similarity of the two passages. A few scholars suggest that Micah, who prophesied after Amos, simply quoted the earlier prophet. Getting bogged down in discussions of sources misses the point. The Micah context evokes Amos 5:13, a text that condemns Israel for its transgression, and introduces the prophet’s call to seek good and not evil (5:14) so that YHWH might deliver a “remnant of Joseph.” This Amos passage also relates the prophet’s challenge of the people’s understanding of the day of YHWH (5:20) as a time when YHWH would intervene on their behalf. Amos 5:20 disabuses the people of this idea. Mic 2:3 confronts a powerful group in Judah with the inevitability of judgment because of their evil (2:1) before their destruction “on that day” (2:4). Mic 2:4 represents one of the few times in the Book of the Twelve where the editorial formula “on that day” introduces a saying of judgment rather than deliverance or restoration for YHWH’s people. In sum, Mic 2:1-5 shows a thematic movement similar to Amos 5:11-20, with the exception that the Amos passage confronts the people of Israel while the message in Micah challenges the powerful of Judah.

Micah 2:4 quotes this lament from those YHWH has punished, though the extent of the quotation is debated. Those quoted lament the destruction, the change of relationship with YHWH, and the loss of land. This quote conveys an ironic, poetic justice as it evokes the themes of 2:2: those who coveted the fields of others now lament the loss of their own; those who plotted to steal the inheritance of others now lament the loss of their inheritance from YHWH.

Casting Lots in Micah 2:5



H. W. Wolff sees this verse as a secondary addition by an exilic editor, made in the vein of scribal prophecy. He notes that “the verse laboriously incorporates vocabulary drawn from traditions of the first allotment of the land in Joshua 14–15 and 18–20.” Thus, for Wolff, Mic 2:5 actualizes the words of Micah for the exilic community as a whole and essentially reverses the conquest. By contrast, M. Sweeney sees the verse as eliminating a social function for the group being punished, namely the right of landowners to participate in the decision-making process of the country: “The casting of lots in order to make major tribal or national decisions (cf. Prov 18:18) [. . .] was apparently a privilege of land ownership in ancient Israel.”

In evaluating the interpretations of Wolff and Sweeney, Wolff’s ideas make better sense of the linguistic terms. First, 2:5 does not speak of the landowners casting lots but of someone casting lots *for them* as that which will be lost. In Joshua, by contrast, the lot was cast for territory. Second, casting lots as a means of making a decision was not limited to landowners. The sailors in Jonah can hardly be presumed to be landowners, yet they cast lots to determine on whose account the storm had arisen. On the whole, then, the suggestion of Wolff appears more plausible.

Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah* (trans. Gary Stansell; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress) 80.

Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 362.

Micah 2:5 announces the consequences of the group’s loss of stature: they will be unable to cast lots in the assembly of YHWH. The precise meaning of these consequences is not easy to reconstruct, as seen by two different interpretations in recent commentaries, but the most likely explanation is that the consequences of the judgment will mean the loss of the land promised by YHWH. [Casting Lots in Micah 2:5]

You Get the Message You Deserve, 2:6-11

With the disputation of Micah 2:6-11, one must pay careful attention to the multiple speakers in the formal structure of the passage, since the change of speakers is not always clearly marked (see [Disputation] in Hos 10:3). This unit begins with a plural, negative command, “do not preach,” introducing the speech of the group to whom the previous unit was addressed. The prophet speaks again in 2:7, confronting his opponents with a series of rhetorical questions. In 2:8-9, the prophet accuses this group of crimes, while 2:10-11 commands people to flee in the face of coming judgment, though the prophet holds little hope that the majority of the people will listen to this message.

Micah 2:6 introduces another quote, this time for those whom the prophet confronts. This tactic represents a common device in a disputation speech where the prophet articulates the objections of those to whom he addresses the message (see Mal 1:2). The extent of the quote is debated, though most think it stops at the end of

2:6. [Who Speaks in Micah 2:7a?] In either case, the message is clear: the patience of YHWH has ended. Judgment is at hand.

The prophetic speaker thus admonishes his hearers with a series of rhetorical questions characterizing the preceding judgment speech (2:1-5) as helpful words to the righteous. Hence, for those “walking uprightly,” the words of the prophet offer consolation. The prophet portrays society in two groups: those who devise wickedness (2:1) and those who walk uprightly (2:7b). This language of confrontation permeates Scripture. Psalm 1 divides the world similarly, and the end of the Book of the Twelve draws a distinction between “those who fear YHWH” (Mal 3:13) and the “arrogant and all the evildoers” (Mal 4:1 [MT 3:19]).

The next two verses create problems because they are difficult to translate. [Translating Micah 2:8] Despite the difficulty, the point of 2:8 seems relatively clear. The prophet accuses those whom he confronts of having abused and stolen from travelers (note parallels with Hos 6:7-9; 7:1-3, where the prophet accuses Israel’s leaders of conspiring with thieves to mug travelers). The prophet then accuses this powerful group of breaking up families by separating women from their houses and children (2:9). This violence also threatens the relationship between the people and God (“You take away my glory forever”).

Next, the prophet commands a group to leave (2:10): “Arise and go, for this is no place to rest.” To whom is this command addressed? Is it a pronouncement of punishment, or does it warn the passersby? Clearly, the verse describes the situation in the land as one of grievous danger. It is difficult to imagine that the prophet here addresses the same group accused of robbing homes. More likely, 2:10 warns the potential victims to avoid danger.

The prophet’s satirical taunt (2:11) rounds off 2:6-11 with an *inclusio*, picking up the verb “preach” with which 2:6 began. However, in contrast to 2:6 where the prophet told the group not to preach, here the prophet suggests that the people want to hear a preacher uttering lies and exhorting them to imbibe wine and strong drink. This *inclusio* paints a picture of a group who wishes

Who Speaks in Micah 2:7a?



Some believe the quote continues only through 2:6 (NRSV; NIV), while others think it goes through 2:7a (Tanach). The rhetorical questions that begin 2:7 imply a negative response that argues in favor of those who see the quote continuing through 2:7a. However, this decision would mean that 2:7b (which must be the prophet speaking) contains no clear introduction. By contrast, the use of the rhetorical questions in 2:7a could also signal a change in speaker. If 2:7a belongs to the words of the prophet’s opponents, then they are surely used satirically because the dialogue they would create would be challenging the prophet’s speech. If they are understood as the words of the prophet, then they confront those who tried to stop the preaching with a warning. The more likely case is that the prophet’s speech begins in 2:7.

Translating Micah 2:8

Ω Several English versions (including NRSV) emend Mic 2:8 because of the awkwardness of the MT. Other versions differ over how to understand “rise up.”

MT: 2:8^aYesterday, he raised them, my people, into an enemy; 2:8^bfrom before a cloak; you strip splendor from those passing by (in) trust, those returning from battle. NRSV: But you rise up against my people as an enemy; you strip the robe from the peaceful, from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war.

NAS: Recently My people have arisen as an enemy. You strip the robe off the garment, from unsuspecting passers-by, *from* those returned from war.

NIV: Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle.

TNK: But an enemy arises against My people. You strip the mantle with the cloak off such as pass unsuspecting, who are turned away from war.

NRSV emends the initial adverb by dividing the consonants into two words, the plural pronoun “you” and the preposition “against” (see Wolff, 70). Related, this translation emends the verb form from third to second person. Sweeney (2.364) argues against emendation. He keeps “yesterday” as in the MT, but he translates the verb as “establish” rather than “rise up” because he says elsewhere the *polel* form of the verb has the sense of “to establish or reestablish.” He treats YHWH as the

subject and “my people” as the direct object. Sweeney’s translation reads, “And yesterday, he (YHWH) would establish my people as an enemy.” Either way, 2:8a conveys a hostile relationship between YHWH and YHWH’s people: either “my people rose up as an enemy” or “he made my people into an enemy.”

Many suggestions have been offered for emending 2:8b as well. The MT begins with a compound preposition, “from before.” Elsewhere, this preposition relates to locations, having the basic sense of “in front of.” However, one wonders whether this compound preposition (*mimûl*) is chosen for its assonance with “yesterday” (*etmûl*). In this sense, “from before” would not relate to space but to time. The resulting translation would clarify and extend the charge of 2:8a: “Earlier you stripped off a fine cloak from those passing by (in) trust, those returning from battle.” Of course, even this translation assumes something is amiss in the text since the phrase “fine cloak” assumes a construct form (cloak of splendor) that is not attested in the MT. The translation offered here (“Earlier you stripped off a fine cloak from those passing trustingly, those returning from battle.”) requires only the confusion of a single letter in Hebrew to make “cloak” understandable in the consonantal text as a construct form (*šlmt* instead of *šlmh*) along with the assumption that “from before” could be used with reference to time as well as space.

Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah* (trans. Gary Stansell; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress).

Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000).

to silence YHWH’s prophet, whose message pronounces judgment, in order to listen to a false prophet whose message they would rather hear.

A Remnant May Survive, 2:12-13

In Micah 2:12-13 the speaker changes to YHWH who promises to “gather all of you, O Jacob [. . .] the survivors of Israel.” The imagery in these two verses has elicited significant discussion in recent years regarding whether it depicts a threat or a promise. On balance, the idea of YHWH gathering sheep like a flock in a pasture—when that flock represents a *remnant* of Israel led by YHWH—makes more sense as an image of deliverance than as judgment.

The confusion stems primarily from the ambiguous images and phrases in 2:13. For example, 2:13 anticipates the going/coming up of one who makes a breach *before them*. The verse then says *they* will create a breach and pass through the gate. The next phrase could be taken one of two ways, depending on how one interprets the antecedent of a third masculine singular pronoun. If that pronoun points back to “gate,” then the phrase means “they will go *through it*” (which essentially repeats the previous statement). This verb, *yāṣāʾ*, can be combined with the preposition *bē* to depict travel through a gate (Neh 2:13). However, if that pronoun refers back to the one who created the breach, then it could mean “then they will go forth *with him*.” This same verb can also be combined with the preposition *bē* in a military context to refer to YHWH going out with an army (Pss 44:10; 60:12). Finally, the last two phrases suggest military procession with the king going forth before the people and with YHWH at their head. Does this mean YHWH is leading the king, who in turn is leading the people? Or, are the last two phrases parallel expressions, both depicting YHWH as the king who will lead?

Given the possibilities, any interpretation must proceed cautiously. Two observations, however, suggest that these verses depict a positive sequence of events. First, the fact that this group constitutes the “survivors of Israel” who go forth with “YHWH at their head” suggests a picture of deliverance more than judgment. The phrase identifying the group as survivors implies that some level of judgment has already occurred. It is hard to imagine that the purpose of gathering survivors would be to lead them to destruction. Second, this interpretation fits the context. Micah 2:10 commands a group to “arise and go” because the place where they are currently is a place of destruction. Thus, 2:10 addresses a subset of the population at large, a group who listens to the prophet to flee the place of wickedness. Thus, if one follows the action of the group, a coherent picture emerges in which a remnant is gathered by YHWH like a flock of sheep in a pen (2:12), which YHWH then leads out of the pen (2:13). With this in mind, it is no large stretch to see this group as a remnant gathered by YHWH (2:12) who will then follow YHWH out of the place where they had been gathered (2:13).

CONNECTIONS

How would the words of this prophet sound in our society? The temptation to look to our own interests and desires rather than to seek the justice and righteousness that God expects has always been part of the human condition. One of the prevailing dangers of the wedding of power and religion is the human tendency to equate “my opinion” with God’s truth.

Biblical texts admonish us to consider how our behavior affects those less fortunate than ourselves. Micah 2:1-5 challenges those whose greed not only controls their own lives but also ruins the lives of others. The greedy remain oblivious to the suffering their actions create. They reject anyone who challenges them to curb their desire for more wealth. What they fail to see is that their actions have inevitable consequences, for they have made themselves into antagonists of God—a battle they will ultimately lose. This message has both individual and corporate implications. As individuals, we are called to serve others, to act in accordance with calls to justice, and to treat others as we want to be treated. Such behavior obviously precludes the use of force or intimidation to gain personal advantage. It also demands that we critique our own behavior by asking ourselves if we tend to manipulate people or situations for our benefit. While these actions are difficult enough for most of us individually, using corporate means to better our own situation—at the expense of others—is much harder to see and more difficult to change. Social systems are harder to change, but their effects may be more damaging. For example, why is it that in most American communities, money spent on education is tied to property taxes? This decision leads to tremendous inequities when building and staffing schools. Poor regions remain impoverished while wealthy areas have more money to spend and help those who already have advantages. To be sure, this example is not one of aggression, like those described in Micah 2:2, but at its core, it is a decision based upon selfish, short-sighted motives.

In Micah 2:6-11, the prophet challenges those who stand in God’s path and disputes their calls to silence him in 2:6-11. Is it really that simple? Can the world simply be divided into those who are on God’s side and those who try to resist God? Such rhetorical strategies often prove effective in debate and confrontation. Sometimes these classifications clarify situations. Nevertheless, they can easily degenerate into demonizing one’s opponents. Paul’s

admonition is helpful here: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The words of Micah 2 challenge those in society who have power and the means to exert it, for they have chosen to use that power to oppress rather than to liberate, to accumulate wealth for their own benefit rather than to utilize resources for the good of humanity, and to live as though God could do nothing to stop them. It is for these actions that the prophet challenges them. He does not speak on his own behalf, but on behalf of those whose land is being swallowed up.

The prophet’s words offer only one way out: flee from the place of corruption (2:10). The upright will hear the truth of the prophet’s message and find guidance (2:7). Though destruction will come, somehow the destruction will not be the end of the story (2:12-13). For modern readers and communities of faith, fleeing the place of corruption might seem impossible. If believers hear this message merely as a call to retreat, then communities of faith will soon become ghettos of fear. Rather, this command challenges those who hear it to “walk uprightly,” in other words to act differently. Instead of corruption, seek integrity. Instead of violence, practice compassion. Instead of empty words, speak words of honesty.

This passage of Micah begins to convey an important theological message through the book’s structure, much as Hosea does. The sudden (but ambiguous) message of hope in Micah 2:12-13 interrupts the message of judgment and doom with a dramatic juxtaposition of YHWH’s deliverance of a remnant. Rather than an extended treatise on God’s compassion, this word comes in a brief pronouncement. This juxtaposition creates a paradox: judgment and salvation alike come from God. These two verses interrupt the prophetic confrontation of Judah and Jerusalem that dominates Micah 1–3. However, this is not the only passage in Micah that makes this dramatic shift. Micah 4–5 conveys an expanded message of hope right after the judgment against Jerusalem, and 7:8-20 climaxes the book with a similar hopeful message that affirms God’s redemptive power immediately after the judgment of 6:1–7:7.

In the broader structure of the Book of the Twelve, this vacillation plays a significant role in the theological portrait of God relative to Judah and Israel. Both Israel and Judah are confronted by prophets whose writings juxtapose words of judgment and hope (Hosea and Micah respectively). Additionally, both Israel and

Judah are confronted by prophets whose writings focus extensively on the inevitability of judgment, only conveying brief words of hope at the end of the writings (Amos and Zephaniah respectively). The effect of these two pairs is to present the prophetic message to Israel and Judah as a call for a change in behavior because the fate of the nation hangs in the balance (Hosea and Micah). When it becomes clear that the leaders and the people will not change, only then does judgment become unavoidable (Amos and Zephaniah).

In setting up this movement, the compilers of the Book of the Twelve convey important theological convictions. First, God did not simply wake up angry one day and decide to destroy Israel and Judah. God patiently but firmly sent prophets with calls for people to change the way they related to God and humanity. Only when these calls were continually rebuffed did the judgment come, first against Israel and then against Judah.

Second, this same idea will be extended to the nations as a whole through a series of allusions to Exodus 34:6-7 in the Book of the Twelve. The long-suffering, patient character of God whose compassion cannot be equaled ultimately holds the guilty accountable. These texts include Joel 2:12-14; 3:19-20; Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18-19; and Nahum 1:2-3. Together, these two devices—allusions to a key descriptive text and structural juxtaposition of judgment and deliverance—not only remind readers of God's expectations and human accountability but also remind us of God's compassion and grace.

THE FAILURE OF RULERS, PROPHETS, AND PRIESTS

Micah 3:1-12

COMMENTARY

The three sections of this chapter each begin with a formulaic introduction: “Hear this” in both 3:1 and 3:9, and “Thus says YHWH” in 3:5. The first section, 3:1-4, provides accusations against the political leaders of the land (heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel). The second unit, 3:5-8, confronts prophets who do not speak on YHWH’s behalf. The third unit, 3:9-12, expands the judgment pronouncements, including not only the leadership and prophets but also the priests. The first and third units begin with virtually identical calls to attention, while the middle unit emphasizes the source of the message by using a messenger formula (“Thus says YHWH”). Taken together, these three units convey serious charges against the political and religious leadership who act for their own benefit and not for the sake of the people.

Your Leaders Devour You, 3:1-4

This unit begins with a call to attention reminiscent of those in Hosea and Amos, where the prophet demands to be heard by a particular group (Hos 4:1; 5:1; Amos 3:1; 4:1; 5:1). The “I” who speaks in 3:1 is the prophet, just as in 3:8, where the speaker contrasts his fate with that of other prophets. This passage begins with a conjunction, “and,” that implies some connection to the preceding chapter. Wolff argues convincingly that 3:1 connects to 2:11, contrasting the confrontational message of the genuine prophet with the babbling of the inebriated preacher.¹

The call to attention in 3:1 addresses the leaders of Jacob and the house of Israel for their failure to exercise justice. [Justice] In 1:5 Jacob and the house of Israel refer to the dual kingdoms of Judah and

Justice

Ω Mic 3:1 expects justice (*mišpāt*) from the leaders of Jacob/Israel. This expectation, however, has already been a topic of discussion in Amos (5:7, 15, 24; 6:12). In Mic 3:8, the prophet contrasts the *mišpāt* given by YHWH with the lack of power exhibited by the prophets who are selling their services (condemned in 3:5, 7). The topic of justice appears again toward the end of the Book of the Twelve (Zech 7:9), where prophets call on the postexilic community to do what the pre-exilic community had failed to do. The contrast in Amos and Micah between “justice” paid for by those with means and the lack of justice for those without ability to pay sets the bar high by assuming that justice should not be something that means one thing for those with resources and another for those without. Our society still struggles with the same question. Conviction rates are higher for the poor than for the wealthy. Sentences handed down are longer for the same crimes committed by people in lower socioeconomic classes. Likely, Amos and Micah would be issuing charges in the streets today because “justice” should not be available only to the highest bidder.

Israel, as evidenced by the mention of Samaria and Jerusalem in that context. Likewise, in Micah 3:1, the combination could mean the same entity (the entire kingdom), or it could refer only to Judah. The latter appears more likely. Micah 3:8-9 refers to problems with the leadership of Jacob whose behavior affects Zion/Jerusalem, not the northern kingdom of Israel. (See also 4:2 and 5:7-8, which use Jacob to refer to Jerusalem/Zion.)

Micah 3:1 ends with a rhetorical question that contains a double entendre: “Should you not know justice?” The question should be answered affirmatively: yes, the lead-

ership should know justice. On the one hand, they should know what justice means and they should practice it as part of the responsibilities of their positions. On the other hand, the question also conveys a veiled threat: should you not experience judgment (i.e., “know justice”) for your actions? Both meanings are taken up in subsequent sections of this unit (3:2-3, 4).

The next verses, Micah 3:2-3, continue to confront the leaders of the country, describing them in terms diametrically opposed to the goals of YHWH. The charge in 3:2 against those who hate good and love evil inverts what one would expect: to hate evil and love good, a saying that appeared in Amos 5:15. Micah 3:2, however, converts the command into an accusation that the leaders have

done just the opposite. In this sense, the accusation also answers the rhetorical question from 3:1: they do *not* know justice. [Micah 3:2 and Amos 5:15]

Readers can barely absorb the significance of this accusation before additional images shock their sensibilities. In 3:2b-3, the prophet accuses the leadership of barbaric cannibalism. There is little argument that these charges are figurative rather than literal, but such charges reflect the desire to depict these leaders’ abhorrent behavior

Micah 3:2 and Amos 5:15



In the Book of the Twelve, the formulaic saying (“Hate evil and love the good”) has already appeared in Amos 5:15—a command directed against the house of Israel (see Amos 5:1). A canonical reading of these prophetic statements leaves readers with the impression that nothing has changed, that the people failed to do as God commanded. But one thing has changed. The accusation in Mic 3:2 is directed primarily against the southern kingdom, which subtly conveys one of Micah’s themes—namely, that the sin of Israel has reached Jerusalem (1:9).

in the most graphic way. In the historical context in which the images were conveyed, these words could easily have been understood as treasonous. The prophet is condemning the king and the political leaders of Judah and Israel. One can almost visualize the butcher's knife removing the skin, cutting flesh from the bones, and chopping the meat to place in the kettle. The inversion of what could be seen as a platitude (love good; hate evil) into an accusation, followed by these brutal and shocking images, makes clear how seriously this passage takes the cynical breaking of trust by the leadership of Judah.

Micah 3:4 answers the rhetorical question at the end of 3:1 from the other side of the coin. Should these God-defying leaders not know justice? Should they not be punished? Micah 3:4 answers affirmatively. The leaders will cry to YHWH, but their wickedness will cause YHWH to turn from them. Justice will come as punishment for their behavior, and God will not intervene to stop it.

The Prophets Mislead You, 3:5-8

While Micah 3:1-4 focuses on political leaders who “devour” the people, 3:5-7 focuses on the religious leaders who sell them out. In Micah 3:5-7, the speaker turns his attention to the prophets who have misled the people into thinking that they will soon find peace, *if* the people are willing to pay them. The oracle denounces these prophets, whose cynical behavior allows them to take advantage of the people's trust. People come to the prophets and request a prediction about the future. If the prophet has been paid, then that prophet gives them a positive response (peace), but if the prophet has *not* been paid, then that prophet pronounces a curse on the people (war). The problem with this behavior is that it cannot be trusted. The greed of the prophet, not God's intentions, controls the message. [Conflict between Prophets]

Micah 3:6-7 pronounces an ironic verdict on these prophets: God will remove their sight and they will be unable to speak. First, 3:6 explores images of the loss of light, symbolizing the absence of God for the prophets. In darkness, a

Conflict between Prophets



Micah is by no means unique in challenging the message of other prophets. For example, Jer 27–29 includes several narrative episodes recounting Jeremiah's confrontations of other named prophets whose message Jeremiah contested. In these cases, Jeremiah condemns the prophets Hananiah (28:1-17) and Shemaiah (29:24-31) for pronouncing words of comfort and peace when Jeremiah predicts judgment and exile (Jer 27:1-22). On one level, then the prophets confronted by both Micah and Jeremiah are portrayed quite similarly in that they offer comfort in the face of judgment. The narratives in Jeremiah, however, do not *explicitly* state that these other prophets make their claims for money. However, Jeremiah condemns these prophets because they have claimed to speak for God when, in Jeremiah's opinion, they are opposing God. Mic 3:5 also condemns the prophets for pronouncing judgment when they are not paid.

prophet cannot see. The images thus convey the loss of power for these prophets, for God no longer provides genuine revelation. Micah 3:7 then conveys the removal of speech from those who make their living by speaking. What is a prophet without a vision or speech? Since prophets see visions from YHWH and speak on YHWH's behalf, the removal of sight and speech goes to the heart of their identity. This punishment removes their ability to function as prophets because they forfeited the right to act as prophets.

Micah 3:8 contrasts the power of YHWH's genuine prophet with that of those who speak for personal gain. The prophet who speaks in 3:8 speaks under the direction of the spirit of YHWH, speaks of authentic justice, speaks with power, and speaks with a singular purpose: to confront the kingdom of God's people with their own rebellion and sin.

Your Fate Awaits You, 3:9-12

Using a traditional call to attention, like Hosea and Amos (see Mic 3:1), Judah's rulers are first commanded to pay attention and then castigated for failing to seek justice and equity. The parallel terms "rulers" and "chiefs" expand the charges against the political leaders of Judah. The call to attention begins the unit almost identically to 3:1. Micah 3:10, however, accuses the leaders of violence toward the people of Jerusalem that is designed to fill the city with blood-

shed. Reference to Zion and Jerusalem in 3:10 associates Jacob with a Jerusalemite setting.

The message continues in Micah 3:11, where the identity of Zion's rulers is clarified. The third feminine singular pronouns tie the condemnation of the rulers back to Zion in 3:9-10. Micah 3:11 functions as a summary accusation that encapsulates the charges of 3:1-10. It mentions the rulers (see 3:1, 9), the priests, and the prophets (see 3:5-6). **[Prophets, Priests, and Rulers]** The charges concern the taking of money by each of these groups for their own benefit rather than speaking truth for the sake of YHWH. Their perspectives toward what they do are controlled by their own sense of entitlement. They mistakenly believe their positions of power and

Prophets, Priests, and Rulers



In ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East, rulers often kept their power structures close to temples. Prophets and priests were employed by the temples and often served as political advisors to kings. Nevertheless, the changing role of prophets involved various acts of mediation between humans and deities. Prophets increasingly became known as spokespersons for the deity. Priests were responsible for performing the rituals (e.g., sacrifice and offerings) that maintained order by keeping the kingdom and its people aligned with the wishes of the deity. The role of the rulers was to maintain the economic, military, and political viability of the kingdom. Many of the resources necessary for this activity came through taxes collected by the temple and its functionaries.

See David L. Petersen, "Prophet, Prophecy," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) 4:622-648 (especially 633-36).

privilege will protect them. They traded their responsibility to rule, teach, and speak for YHWH for the trappings of power and wealth.

Micah 3:12 ties the fate of Zion to the missteps of its religious and political leaders. The impending destruction of Jerusalem is related to the greed and cynicism of its leaders. The verse culminates the judgment against Jerusalem that began in Micah 1:5-7. The metaphors in 3:12 invoke images of destruction. A plowed field and a heap of rubble could be seen as part of the planting process, where the soil is tilled and the debris piled up. However, when applied to a city, the image of a leveled field implies devastation, for the piles of stone cleared by the plow would be the remains of buildings that would have once stood in the “field.”

In addition, for the third time the high place(s) are mentioned in Micah (see 1:3, 5). Cumulatively, these three references to high places present a spatial picture that sinks lower with each occurrence. The high places in 1:3 are a poetic description of the *mountains* where YHWH treads, while the second reference (1:5) condemns the “high place” of Judah meaning the *hilltop* locations of idolatrous religious practices. Here, in 3:12, the term “high places” connotes a *mound* of rubble in the forest. No longer are the high places a threat to the worship of YHWH; rather, they are a symbol of YHWH’s judgment. Consequently, 3:12 marks the pivot point of Micah. **[Micah 3:12 and the Prophetic Context]** Before, Samaria’s destruction implicitly served to warn Jerusalem (1:5-7) that it was in danger of suffering the same fate (1:9), but Micah 3:12 takes up the images used of Samaria in 1:5-7 (high places, heap of ruins) and explicitly applies them to Jerusalem to accentuate the fate of the city.

Micah 3:12 and the Prophetic Context



The significance of Mic 3:12 points beyond the immediate context to larger issues in the prophetic tradition and canon. First, Mic 3:12 may have established a precedence granting prophets a measure of protection when facing their kings. From its inception, Israel’s monarchs had to contend with the role of the prophet. From Nathan’s challenge to David (2 Sam 12:1-10) to the confrontation of Amos and Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17), prophets frequently challenged the political leaders. Sometimes, to be sure, prophets paid the price for this confrontation (such as Jehoiakim’s murder of Uriah related in Jer 26:20-23), but pressures like those described in Jer 26:12-19 appear to have prohibited the kings from acting precipitously. Specifically, Jer 26:18 explicitly quotes Mic 3:12 as evidence to save Jeremiah’s life a century after Micah lived. Threatened with death for uttering prophecies against the king and the city, Jeremiah’s life was saved only because Hezekiah did not kill Micah for what he had said “in the name of YHWH” (26:16). The passage therefore implies that after Micah, the king does not have the right to execute a prophet when he speaks in the name of the deity. See also **[Prophets and Kings]** and **[Prophets and Kings at Mari]** associated with Amos 7:10-17.

Second, Mic 3:12 serves as the center of the Book of the Twelve according to a Masoretic note in the margins of the Hebrew text (see BHS, which reflects the marginal note that appears in the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible). The note implies it is the midpoint of “the book” by verse count, but since there are 64 verses after this verse in Micah and only 40 that precede it, it clearly cannot have referred to Micah by itself. Rather, this note highlights Micah’s role as the center of the Book of the Twelve, which is confirmed by the fact that this verse falls right in the middle of the 1050 verses in the Book of the Twelve.

CONNECTIONS

In this passage, the voice of a single prophet (3:1, 8) confronts the political and religious establishment failing to perform their duties properly. At its core, these verses challenge leaders who use the system for their own benefit rather than as a means to work for the people. Political leaders, who should shepherd the flock, are portrayed as gluttons more intent on consuming their sheep than guiding them (3:2-3). Prophets and priests care more about what they can charge for their services than the message they should proclaim (3:5, 11). The abuse of power and greed in the name of God functions as the thematic linchpin of the accusations in this passage.

Political leaders have responsibility for leading nations, and as part of the responsibility they control the reins of power—both military and political—for the purpose of preserving order and establishing justice. However, when this purpose is lost, the tools of power can quickly become arbitrary instruments of oppression used to benefit those in power at the expense of the people as a whole. Nowhere in the prophetic corpus is this situation presented more dramatically than in Micah 3:1-4, where the leaders of the country no longer know justice and where their actions invert good and evil. As a result of their behavior, people suffer while the leaders remain oblivious to the connection between their deeds and the suffering. These leaders will be surprised to learn in future times of trouble that YHWH will not intervene on their behalf (3:4).

Within the structure of kingdoms, the prophets of YHWH should be the ones who hold political leaders accountable. Those who speak for YHWH should be the ones to confront wealth and power when it is not used properly. In the portrayal of Micah 3, however, the prophets and the priests—those who speak for YHWH—seem oblivious to the suffering of the people because of their own greed. They offer words of peace to those who pay them, while cursing those who cannot or will not pay (3:5, 11). Meanwhile the people suffer, and the city becomes calloused toward bloodshed because that is all it knows (3:10).

Into this context steps a single prophet to challenge these leaders, to hold up their deeds to them, and to remind them of the insignificance of their power when compared to God's. This prophet does not hesitate to condemn the actions of the powerful (3:1), for this

prophetic voice derives its power from the source of ultimate power (3:8). The spirit of YHWH empowers this prophet with a sense of justice to confront the shortcomings and rebellion of the religious and political leadership of the country.

It has never been easy or popular to confront those in power when they abuse that power or seek to benefit financially from it. This prophet's words are dangerous to those in power who have a vested interest in maintaining their position of influence and wealth. A century after Micah, Jeremiah found himself in a similar position, confronting the king and his cronies with words they considered to be acts of treason. According to Jeremiah 26:12-24, only recalling the words of Micah stops the king from killing Jeremiah. The story of Jeremiah shows that these words continued to challenge leaders to work for justice and for the needs of others because they were grounded in the power of God. The power of God cares nothing for military trappings and armaments, for the power of God seeks justice. The power of God does not ask, who will pay me if I speak against injustice? The power of God searches for justice and equity (3:9).

One voice can make a difference in situations that seem hopeless, but one voice is not enough. The text of Micah 3 does not tell us that this story ended happily ever after. Rather, the trajectory of this confrontation heads in exactly the opposite direction toward the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet this destruction should not be seen in terms of appeasing an angry deity. The impending destruction derives from the consequence of the behavior of these leaders. While the lonely voice of one prophet shines the light of justice on their deeds, the abuse of power by the rulers undercuts the foundation of society. While the

Desmond Tutu



As the first black general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Bishop Tutu has been both a singular voice calling for the oppressive white-led government of South Africa to put an end to apartheid and a focal point for and inspiration for others who join the struggle for justice in South Africa and around the world.

(Credit: Barclay Burns)

lonely voice of one prophet cries against the greed of those who should be speaking for God, they become so indifferent to the suffering of people that they lose their ability hear God and to see suffering in the world.

The message of this text remains potentially powerful not because it allows us to see the shortcomings of leaders of the past but because it confronts us in the present. Are we so concerned about our comfort that we fail to see the suffering around us? Are we so interested in power and prestige that we are willing to step over those around us to achieve them? Have we lost the ability to hear the voice of God calling for justice and equity? If so, then our own visions will fail. If so, we will perceive no response from God. If so, peace will continue to elude us.

NOTE

1. Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary* (trans. Gary Stansell; Minneapolis: Augsburg 1990) 95.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Micah 4:1–5:15 (MT 4:1–5:14)

COMMENTARY

Micah 4–5 shows clear evidence of editorial shaping, utilizing small units organized around a recurring series of introductory markers with chronological implications. [Recurring Introductory Markers] The introductions in these two chapters convey a strong orientation toward the future, indeed the distant future, yet they also create a dialectic for the “current” generation. Because the variant perspectives within these units point to diverse origins of the units, despite the tendency toward editorial linkages, one also needs to ask how the placement of the units is best understood.

The chronological emphasis created by the introductory formulas in Micah 4–5 occupies an important location immediately after the midpoint of the Book of the Twelve (Mic 3:12; see also [Micah 3:12 and the Prophetic Context]). Given the high probability that these chapters have a postexilic provenance, when Micah was already being transmitted with other writings in the Book of the Twelve, one should interpret the eschatological orientation of these “future” elements not merely as postexilic texts addressed to some amorphous postexilic audience.¹ Rather, the literary context, combined with a respect for the work of the editors who were shaping the Twelve, demands that one take seriously that these later texts were conceptualized as part of the message of Micah. [Growth of Micah 4–5] In this respect, while the *social* location of the writer/editor who incorporated these sayings reflects a postexilic context, *the literary* context places Micah in the eighth century, most prominently in the reign of Hezekiah (see 1:1). Hence, the function of the speeches in Micah 4–5 should not be overlooked. They “anticipate” the time from the eighth century to Jerusalem’s destruction in the sixth century. These passages thus explain the literary “future” from the prophet’s voice, but they are already addressing the postexilic audience. This becomes particularly

Recurring Introductory Markers		
The interplay of recurring introductory markers provides a sense of thematic cohesion within four groups of (sometimes) disparate statements.		
Group 1	4:1 And it will be in the latter days 4:6 On that day, utterance of YHWH	The future orientation of Mic 4–5 begins (4:1-3) with the citation paralleled in Isa 2:2-4, utilizing the phrase “in the latter days” to introduce the quote. Mic 4:6 marks a transitional introduction with the phrase “in that day,” thus formally placing the next verses in that same distant future. By contrast, the headings of the second group (4:8, 9, 11; 5:1) jerk the reader’s attention back to the “present” by pronouns of direct address (“and you” in 4:8; 5:1) bracketing a series of sayings dominated by the adverb “now” (the introductions in 4:9, 11; 5:1). It is probably not accidental that the pronoun and the adverb, despite different spellings, are pronounced identically (<i>’atâh</i> and <i>’atâh</i>). The introductory formulas of the third group of short sayings (5:5, 7, 8, 10) all begin, “and it will be” (<i>wěhâyâh</i> ; see also 4:1), once again pushing the reader’s attention into the future with a series of four promise statements. The fourth group of sayings overlaps with the first and third in that the transitional verse (5:10) begins with the final “and it will be” (like the third group), followed by “on that day, utterance of YHWH” (as in the first group of sayings; see 4:6). Immediately, it follows with the first of four sentences beginning with “and I will cut off”
Group 2	4:8 And you (<i>wě’atâh</i>) 4:9 Now (<i>’atâh</i>) 4:11 and now (<i>wě’atâh</i>) 4:13 (2fs) arise and thresh, Lady Zion 5:1 (MT 4:14) now (<i>’atâh</i>) 5:2 (MT 5:1) and you (<i>wě’atâh</i>)	
Group 3	5:5 (MT 5:4) and it will be 5:7 (MT 5:6) and it will be, a remnant of Jacob in the midst of many people 5:8 (MT 5:7) and it will be, a remnant of Jacob, among the nations, in the midst of many people 5:10 (MT 5:9) and it will be	that serve to structure the final group of sayings. In addition, the third group of sayings ends with the same verbal root (“they will be cut off” in 5:9).
Group 4	on that day, utterance of YHWH and I will cut off 5:11 (MT 5:10) and I will cut off 5:12 (MT 5:11) and I will cut off 5:13 (MT 5:12) and I will cut off 5:14 (MT 5:13) and I will uproot/destroy 5:15 (MT 5:14) and I will do vengeance on the nations who do not listen	

clear in the prophetic response to YHWH’s speech in 5:5, where the reference to the raising of “seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers” corresponds to the eight kings who rule from Hezekiah to Jerusalem’s destruction. The four groups of prophetic logia (4:1-7; 4:8–5:4 [MT 4:8–5:3]; 5:5-9 [MT 5:4-8]; 5:10–15 [MT 5:9-14]) created by these repeating introductions allow one to see the editorial logic of the chapters as they progress.

Peace for Zion and the Remnant in the Latter Days, 4:1-7

The first cluster of Micah 4–5 derives from two units (4:1-5, 6-7) that portray “days” (see 4:1, 6) in the distant future when YHWH

Growth of Micah 4–5



Rehearsals of the interpretation of Mic 4–7 as exilic and postexilic expansions of an earlier Micah corpus are found in many commentaries. The redactional models, however, are still very much in flux. For example, H. W. Wolff sees Mic 6–7 as later than Mic 4–5, while several recent commentators have seen Mic 4–5 as later insertions that interrupt a connection between Mic 3 and Mic 6. One recent commentary deserves note for approaching the question differently. H. Utzschneider has recently interpreted Micah as a kind of two-act drama (chs. 1–5 and 6–7) whose later material reflects upon the growing book, often with the use of traditions from outside the book. Unlike synchronic dramatic readings, Utzschneider recognizes that the material in Micah comes from different periods, and he essentially tries to distinguish between those that could be earlier from those that must be later in order to postulate how the drama came to be. For example, Utzschneider recognizes that several texts from Mic 1–3 could go back to the eighth-century prophet (e.g., 3:12; as well as portions of 1:10–16; 2:1–5; and 2:6–11), but that their current literary context shows evidence of later reflection. For him, the first written addition of anything approaching the Micah text that we have comes from the exilic period and involves the first five scenes of the first act (essentially 1:2–5:3, excluding 4:1–5, 6–7). Utzschneider dates the sixth and final scene of the first act (5:4–14) to a point later in the postexilic period, and the promise to Zion (4:1–5, 6–7) with its parallel to Isaiah into the Hellenistic period. Utzschneider dates the first

scene of the second act (6:1–7:7) to the fifth–fourth centuries based upon its use of both allusions to Deuteronomistic literature and Priestly regulations. The second scene of the second act (7:8–20), for Utzschneider, presupposes the text of the first act (with the exception of 4:1–5) and could not have been appended prior to the third century.

Utzschneider also comments briefly on the relationship of Micah to the Book of the Twelve. He presents a brief synopsis of the ideas of both A. Scharf and B. M. Zapff, and he concurs that the parallel growth of Micah within the growing corpus is quite plausible with his dramatic model. Scharf sees the additions of Mic 4–7 in the context of the growth of first Hosea and Amos, and then the Book of the Twelve (177–201). Nevertheless, he disagrees with Scharf's dating of Mic 6 to a Deuteronomistic milieu because, for Utzschneider, Mic 6 also incorporates material from later Old Testament perspectives. In this respect, then, he finds himself closer to Zapff than to Scharf.

Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary* (trans. Gary Stansell; Minneapolis: Augsburg 1990) 145.

Helmut Utzschneider, *Micah* (Zürcher Bibelkommentar 24/1; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005) 25–29.

Aaron Scharf, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftübergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998) 177–201.

Burkard M. Zapff, *Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Michabuch im Kontext des Dodekapropheten* (BZAW 256; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997).

James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 141–44.

promises peace and exaltation for Zion/Jerusalem. Micah 4:1–5 involves two sections: 4:1–3, a text that parallels Isaiah 2:2–4, and 4:4–5, the ending constructed for Micah's version of this Isaianic text. [Parallel of Isaiah 2:2–5 and Micah 4:1–5] The two parts present a dramatic shift in the tenor and theme of the material of Micah 1–3 (1) by offering idyllic images of peace rather than judgment (4:1–3), (2) by including deliberations on the nations in those promises (4:4–5), and finally, (3) by focusing on promises to the remnant population (Mic 4:6–7).

Micah 4:1–3. Micah 4:1 begins with an editorial introduction that signals the following promise takes place in the distant future. [The Chronological Formula] The promise focuses on two issues: the centrality of Jerusalem and the inclusion of the nations among those who seek YHWH there. These two issues continue to be the

Parallel of Isaiah 2:2-5 and Micah 4:1-5

Isa 2:2-5 In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Mic 4:1-5 In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, ²and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

³He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more;

⁴but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. ⁵For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.

central focus of the larger unit, though two very different attitudes toward the nations unfold in subsequent verses: one of peaceful coexistence in the Isaiah parallel (e.g., 4:1-5), and the other of conquest (see 4:13).

Zion is depicted as the "highest of the mountains" even though it is not literally the highest hill in the region. The image of foreign peoples "streaming" to Jerusalem depicts a pilgrimage to the hilltop of Zion. This idea continues into 4:2 where words spoken by foreign nations demonstrate that the nations come to seek YHWH; they come seeking training in how to live lives pleasing to the God of Judah. The metaphors

of YHWH's "ways" and "paths" also appear in Psalms (e.g., 25:4, 9-10; 27:11) and in wisdom literature (e.g., Job 19:8; Prov 1:15) to convey human lifestyles in proper relationship to YHWH.

Micah 4:2 consists of three parts: an introductory formula, the quote it introduces placed in the mouth of the nations, and the aphoristic rationale affirming the centrality of Jerusalem in God's plan. According to Micah 4:2, the nations recognize YHWH in Jerusalem as teacher par excellence, but just as astonishingly the substance of YHWH's teaching concerns how to live life under the guidance of YHWH. The rationale for their desire concludes the verse, and probably should be included in the quote of the nations (contra NRSV). This aphoristic rationale highlights the centrality of Jerusalem for the law and the prophets. The verse assumes that

instruction (*tôrâ*) and the word of YHWH (a phrase associated with prophets in Old Testament tradition; see Joel 1:1) emanate from the city because of YHWH's presence there.

Micah 4:3 depicts YHWH as the ultimate judge whose fair and honest rulings in disputes among the nations lead to a cessation of hostility. An implicit causal relationship exists between the first and second parts of 4:3, as YHWH's judgment ("He shall judge between many peoples") leads the nations to conclude they no longer need implements of war or military training ("They will beat their swords into plowshares"). The cessation of war is not, however, where this passage stops. Rather, Micah 4:4–5 extend this depiction into a vision of peaceful tranquility.

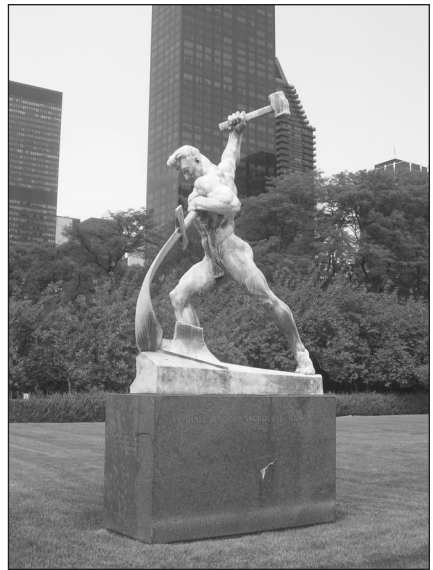
Micah 4:4–5. This section differs significantly from the parallel in Isaiah 2:2–4. In Micah 4:4, the inhabitants (presumably of the nations and Judah) will remain serene, resting and peaceful, benefiting from the land's fertility, unafraid of aggression from a bordering state. Micah 4:5 continues the peaceful message, envisioning coexistence among the nations and their gods. In so doing, 4:5 describes a situation where each nation serves its own god ("all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god"), a significant shift from the message of Micah 4:2 (= Isa 2:2), where the nations come to Jerusalem to worship YHWH. Micah 4:4 utilizes a traditional blessing formula in a manner that comes close to the promise for Judah described in Zech 3:10.

Micah 4:6–7. Micah 4:6 begins a new unit, though the introductory formula ("on that day") introduces a YHWH speech that places the action in the same time frame as 4:1–5. The speech offers restoration to two groups—the wounded and the banished. The substance of the

The Chronological Formula

ΑΩ The NRSV translates the introduction rather generically as "in days to come," which correctly indicates that the phrase simply means "in the (distant) future." Other English translations may at first appear to stay closer to the Hebrew formulation (such as the NIV and NAS, "in the last days"). One sees, however, the distinct hint of anachronistic Christian eschatology in such formulations that are not intended with the Hebrew formulation of "later days." It is clear from texts like Gen 49:2; Num 24:14; and Deut 4:30 that the Hebrew phrase ("later days") implies an unspecified period in the future, not a time of final judgment.

Swords into Plowshares



The image of beating swords into plowshares has often been cited as a symbol of peace. This language, which also appears in the parallel text of Isa 2, appeals to the universal desire for peace among people of good will. The sculpture *Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares* by Evgeniy Vuchetich dramatizes this desire for peace. It sits in the United Nations garden in New York City. The sculpture was donated by the Soviet Union in 1959 during the height of the Cold War.

Evgeniy (also spelled Evgeny) Vuchetich (1908–1974). *Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares*. 1957. Sculpture. U.N. north garden area, New York NY. (Credit: Rodsan 18, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Image-UN_Swords_into_Plowshares_Statue.JPG)

Micah 4:6-7 and the Book of the Twelve

Mic 4:6-7 and Zeph 3:18-20 are linked editorially to one another in the Book of the Twelve. See the discussion in Zephaniah. A close comparison of the common elements in these verses suggests that Zeph 3:18-20 has been formulated with an eye toward Mic 4:6-7 on the one hand and Hag 1:3-4 on the other. These adaptations suggest that Zeph 3:18-20 alludes to Mic 4:6-7 to underscore the nearness of the fulfillment for the deliverance of the lame and outcast, i.e., the inhabitants of Jerusalem. See the discussion of Zeph 3:18-20 in this commentary for a more detailed development of the allusion, especially [Zephaniah 3:19 and the Use of Micah 4:6-7].

For further reading, see James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 209–215.

restoration focuses on initial activity with a long-term purpose. Specifically, YHWH promises to return the lame and the outcast (to Jerusalem), who together constitute those whom YHWH has afflicted. This promise presupposes a period of devastation and exile that looks well past the eighth century. The purpose of the return is to reestablish the nation in Jerusalem. The promise of 4:6-7 is taken up in Zephaniah. [Micah 4:6-7 and the Book of the Twelve]

But What about “Now”? 4:8–5:4 (MT 4:8–5:3)

The chronological markers of Micah 4–5 as a whole (see [Recurring Introductory Markers]) complicate the task of interpreting how the sequence of events should unfold. These markers suggest an important point in the distant future, occurring prior to the events of 4:8 (see 4:1, 6) and after those of 5:4. Yet the future orientation of these markers is interrupted by the quadruple use of the word “now” (*‘atâh* in 4:9, 10, 11; 5:1) in this second group of texts. The rhetorical engagement of the current generation that begins in 4:8 continues through the end of the chapter by *anticipating* a series of events that moves from a promise of restoration (4:8) to a pronouncement of exile to (4:10ba) and redemption from Babylon (4:10bβ) followed by an attack from “many nations” against Zion (4:11) and YHWH’s plan for Zion’s victory over the nations (4:12-13). Hence, even when addressing the “current” generation, the anticipated action of these verses forces readers to think in big blocks of time that stretch beyond the exile—a long stretch indeed when one considers the eighth-century focus of Micah conveyed in 1–3. This shift is every bit as dramatic as the radical change in First Isaiah from the Hezekiah narratives of 36–39 to the anticipated restoration from exile that begins in Isaiah 40. [Micah and Isaiah]

Micah 4:8 changes from the future markers of 4:1, 6 to address the current audience directly (“and you”). Simultaneously, this verse provides a conceptual framework for understanding the preceding promise (4:1-5) to the nations. The promise of peace to the

Micah and Isaiah



In many respects, in Mic 4–5 (which is located immediately after the midpoint of the Book of the Twelve), one sees the dynamics of the book of Isaiah in miniature. Not only does one find the parallel to Isa 2:2–5 in Mic 4:1–3 but the radical chronological shift (from the eighth century to the sixth) so prominent in the middle of Isaiah also appears in Micah. In Isaiah, the narratives about Hezekiah adapted for their context in Isa 36–39 (see 2 Kgs 18–20) conclude with an ominous episode wherein Hezekiah proudly displays all

the treasures of Jerusalem to a Babylonian delegation (Isa 39:1–8). One can hardly miss the implication: the removal of one serious threat does not serve as reason to celebrate, because Babylon will soon take Assyria's place. Immediately thereafter in Isaiah, chapter 40 begins by describing the redemption of Zion because her punishment has been paid. This redemption took the form of a promise of the end of the exile and the return of displaced Judeans to Jerusalem.

nations does not represent a warm-hearted hope for a return to a simpler time. Rather, peace to the nations is tied to the ascendant role of Jerusalem as the city chosen by YHWH, a typical emphasis of Zion theology. [Zion Theology in Micah] However, the promise of a *return* to a position of dominion presumes that Zion's current position does not meet this standard.

The tenor of the passage changes from promise to threat with the use of three rhetorical questions in 4:9. The first question, addressed to Lady Zion, implies a threat against which she cries out. Literally, the question asks, “Why do you (2fs) cry out a cry?” The next two questions are syntactically interrelated to one another, but they require a decision from the reader. “Is a king not in you, or has your counselor perished?” The last phrase of 4:9 clearly implies Lady Zion (= Jerusalem) is in distress, but should the reader assume a positive or negative answer to the question regarding the king/counselor of Zion? Answering this question requires both a syntactical and conceptual point of entry. The syntax of the dual question (“Is this . . . or this?”) usually implies a response of disbelief. The two parts repeat the same question for emphasis.² Conceptually, the address to Lady Zion presumes traditional affirmations proclaiming YHWH as king, especially since poetic texts can also refer to YHWH as counselor (see Pss 16:7; 32:8; Isa 14:24, 27; 23:8–9). Read in this way, YHWH reminds Zion that her fate is secure because of the presence of YHWH, her king and counselor.

The metaphor used to describe the distress Lady Zion experiences is that of birth pangs, an apt metaphor since several prophetic texts elsewhere depict Zion as a mother whose children are the inhabitants of Jerusalem.³ The fate of these children rests with the

Zion Theology in Micah



Zion theology represents a particular stream of tradition centered in Jerusalem and its cult. This perspective tends to accentuate three recurring themes: YHWH's choice of Jerusalem as the holy place with which to associate his name; YHWH's choice of David, and David's descendants, to rule for him in Jerusalem; and YHWH's promise of protection for Jerusalem from its many enemies. (Cf. [Zion Theology in Zechariah].)

fate of Lady Zion herself, meaning they can either be threatened with devastation (Lam 1:5) or given signs of promise (Isa 60:4). The irony of Micah 4:9 should also not be overlooked since the cause of the pangs is the threat of the death of her inhabitants/children, not their birth.

Micah 4:10 continues to operate from the metaphor of the pain associated with birth. Now, however, the irony becomes more transparent as the pain takes the form of exile to Babylon. This pronouncement of Zion's exile to Babylon does not comport well with events in the eighth century. Indeed, for over a century, scholars have considered most of Micah 4–7 to be the work of exilic and/or postexilic editors who appended words of hope to the judgment orientation so prominent in Micah 1–3. Nevertheless, for those who compiled these chapters, the implications of Micah's message of judgment culminate with the Babylonian destruction.

Immediately after the pronouncement of exile, the second half of 4:10 changes again, this time from judgment to promise: "There, YHWH will redeem you from the hands of your enemies." The rapid movement created by the pronouncement of exile to Babylon followed immediately by a pronouncement of Zion's redemption quickly passes over the time of destruction and punishment in order to reaffirm YHWH's long-term goal of restoration.

Micah 4:11–12 places Zion's redemption in the context of a broader threat from "many nations," not just Babylon. The nations are depicted as the enemy of Zion (unlike 4:2–4). The chronological relationship of these verses to their context derives from the introductory "now" that begins both 4:11 and 4:9. Readers must decide whether these verses should be understood as taking place at the same time as the events described in "the latter days" (4:1) and "on that day" (4:6), or whether they should conceptualize "now" as the days of Micah, the eighth-century prophet. This is no easy decision, since the word "now" could also mean "in these circumstances." Given the future orientation of the punishments regarding Babylon in 4:10, one could assume the time frame should be the same as that in 4:1, 6. However, repetition of "now" in this section of speeches makes more sense as addressed to the current generation (presumed to be in the time of Micah). For the message of the book, however, deliverance and threat are both placed against the backdrop of YHWH's plans. Much like the call to arms in Joel 3:9–10, the implicit warning to the nations concerns

antagonism toward YHWH and YHWH's people. Micah 4:12 contrasts the actions of the nations assembled against Zion with their ignorance of YHWH's plans. The nations assemble for action against Zion without knowing that YHWH will empower Zion to defeat them, as the action in 4:13 reveals.

In 4:13, YHWH's command to Zion depicts her as a raging bull, whose horns and feet become all the more potent because they are now made of metal. Significantly, the actions of this bull are directed against the nations, a direct contrast to the description of the peaceful relationship between Zion and the nations at the beginning of the chapter. Here is where the chronological dichotomy begins to make some sense. The distant promise of peace with the nations contrasts with the interim period of exile, redemption, and hostility because the latter must be endured before the peaceful scenario will come about.

The relationship of Micah 5:1 to this context and the next is difficult to assess on at least three levels: person-number of addressee, thematic changes, and chronology. First, 5:1 continues the feminine singular address to Lady Zion in 4:9-13, while 5:2 begins a second masculine singular address to Judah. Second, reference to the ruler in 5:1 thematically anticipates what follows in 5:2-4. Zion is besieged in 5:1, while 5:2 anticipates aid from one from Bethlehem. Micah 5:1 changes direction thematically by abandoning the raging bull metaphor of 4:13, although it still addresses Lady Zion (the city personified), who faces a siege from an unnamed enemy. Third, the chronology of 5:1 is ambiguous relative to the context. As with 4:11, 5:1 also begins with "now," effectively asking the reader to return to the time of Micah in the eighth century. The siege imagery makes sense by assuming a primary allusion to the events of 701 and the Sennacherib siege (see 2 Kgs 18-19; Isa 36-37), but the ambiguity is probably deliberate. By the author's leaving the enemy unnamed, the reader of Micah can assume an eighth-century context like the siege of Sennacherib in 701 BCE or, simultaneously, understand the verse as a foreshadowing of the events of 587 BCE.

Reference to the "striking of the cheek" of Judah's ruler could imply the wounding, death, or humiliation of the king, a description vague enough to be applicable to the siege of Sennacherib (with its narrative traditions depicting the Assyrian attempt to humiliate Hezekiah) and narrative traditions concerning

Jerusalem's destruction with the exile of one king (Jehoiachin) and the brutalization of another (Zedekiah).

The transition from 5:1 to 5:2 abruptly changes addressees from Lady Zion to Bethlehem. The subunit that follows (5:2–4) offers a notoriously complex line of thought. It promises a Davidic king/shepherd (5:2) who will tend his flock under the protection of

Shepherd as King



Several prophetic texts rely on the image of shepherd to connote the (Davidic)

king: Isa 56:11; Jer 12:10; 23:1-2; 50:6; Ezek 34:2-10; Zech 10:2-3; and 11:15-17.

YHWH (5:4). [Shepherd as King] This image is taken up in the New Testament by interpreting the verse messianically. [Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:6] Complicating the picture is the action of 5:3 that, in its current form, relates causally to 5:2

("therefore"). No consensus exists on the exact meaning of 5:2 because its pronouns and verbs have multiple possible antecedents.⁴ Rather than rehearse the many variations, this commentary will attempt a coherent reading of the verse in context. To do so, however, requires understanding 5:3 differently than the NRSV. This verse is thus here translated: "Therefore, he (*YHWH*) will give them until the time when she who gives birth (*Zion*, see 4:10) has given birth, and the rest of his (*the ruler's*) brothers will

return to the sons of Israel." [Translating Micah 5:3] Thus, the promissory character of 5:2 becomes tied to an understanding of the period from the Hezekiah crisis to the Babylonian crisis, a line of thought picked up again in 5:5. Seen in this light, Micah 5:2–4 promises that a Davidic king (likely intending Hezekiah) will deliver Judah from the Assyrian threat (5:1), preserving the Davidic monarchy in Judah for a time (5:3).

Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:6



Mic 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

2 Sam 5:1-3 ¹Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. ²For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: *It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.*" ³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

Matt 2:4-6 ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he (Herod) inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.*"

The Davidic connotations implicit in Mic 5:2 are strengthened in Matt 2:6 by the inclusion of language found in 2 Sam 5:2 (see italics).

"And It Shall Be," 5:5-9 (MT 5:4-8)

In Micah 5:5-9, unlike 5:1-4, YHWH appears only in the third person. The prophet should be understood as the speaker. Micah 5:5-6 begins the third series of sayings (see [Recurring Introductory Markers]) by shifting back to a focus on future

Translating Micah 5:3

ΑΩ The following translation includes notes and parenthetical designations regarding the identities of some of the pronouns: “Therefore, he (YHWH) will give them until the time when she who gives birth (Zion, see 4:10) has given birth, and the rest of his (the ruler’s) brothers will return to the sons of Israel.” Unlike the NRSV (“Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; and the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of the Israel”), this new translation does not anticipate a period of punishment (“give them *up* until the time”) but a delay

of punishment (give them until the time). This translation assumes that the interpolation of 5:3 draws from the context in several ways. First, it assumes a threat to Jerusalem that culminates during the reign of Hezekiah. Second, it draws on the imagery of Zion’s birth pangs from 4:10, which in turn implies that the metaphorical “birth” will be completed in Babylon. Third, as many have noted, 5:3 draws upon the language of Isa 7:14, providing a sign of the removal of the threat to Judah. Fourth, 5:3 reiterates the promise of a Davidic monarchy, but only for a set period.

events. This section is composed of three short sayings (5:5-6, 7, 8), each beginning with “and it will be.”

Micah 5:5 begins with a statement that refers back to the promise of 5:2-4. Literally, the phrase that begins the verse is translated, “And this will be peace.” The antecedent of “this” is not clear because of the unusual syntax, but it is usually interpreted to refer to the ruler promised in 5:2. However, such a reading ignores the more common use of “this” (to refer to something present or new) and “that (one)” to refer to something already mentioned.⁵ Rather than the pronoun being understood as a reference back to the one extolled in v. 4 as in most of the English translations, a more natural reading syntactically would be to treat the phrase as the introduction to what follows: “And this will be peace.” As a result, this opening clause suggests that the potential Assyrian incursion into Judah will be thwarted by a series of shepherds/rulers.

A second unusual construction in 5:5-6 follows the introductory formula. The first and last lines of this verse contain clauses linked by the construction “though . . . and though” (*kî . . . wěkî*). In fact, this grammatical marker links 5:5-6 together in an A-B-B-A pattern where A constitutes the two double conditional sentences and B indicates the two consequential statements. These statements do not question whether Assyrians will invade. Rather, they affirm Judah will endure *despite* Assyrian invasions. [Micah 5:5-6] Reference to “seven . . . and eight” uses formulaic patterns that appear in wisdom literature and in the prophetic corpus. This numeric formula can be interpreted in two ways: in light of numerical sayings where the second, larger number is the actual number of items listed (see Prov 30:18-20, 21-23, 29-31) or like the refrain in Amos 1–2 (“for three transgressions and for four . . .”) where the

Micah 5:5-6

ΑΩ Hence, the verses should be understood this way:

A *Though* Assyria come against our land, *and though* he tread upon our citadels,

B yet will we raise against him seven shepherds and eight rulers of men;

B and they will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword and the land of Nimrod at its entrances, A and he will deliver from Assyria *though* he come against our land, *and though* he tread upon our citadels.

numbers do not introduce a corresponding list of four transgressions. In the latter case, no specific list is intended. Most commentators assume the numeric formula in Micah 5:5 functions like the formulas in Amos, providing no specific list. When one reads Micah 4–5 as though it were spoken in the eighth century, however, though most critical commentators think it was composed later, it actually makes good sense as a reference to the period from Hezekiah to the destruction of Jerusalem. This quasi-apocalyptic reading

receives support from the fact that the number of Davidic kings from the time of Hezekiah to the destruction of Jerusalem totals eight (Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, Jehohoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah).

Micah 5:6 describes the actions of the shepherds/rulers. The NRSV translates, presumably for stylistic reasons, the initial verb as “rule,” but in doing so it changes the metaphorical connotation of the connection to the preceding verse because the verb that opens 5:6 is actually “to shepherd” (*raʿâh*). Thus, the shepherds of 5:5 will shepherd the Assyrians with a sword. By itself, this image might imply that the shepherds should be interpreted as kings from Mesopotamia, but the second half of the verse extends the action of these shepherds in a way that demonstrates they cannot be Assyrian kings. The second half of 5:6 claims that the shepherds who will arise actually *oppose* the Assyrians. Their shepherding will result in delivering the people of Judah (“they shall rescue us”), even though the Assyrians will make incursions into Judah (“though they come into our land”). In this scenario, the action of the shepherds toward Assyria is not “ruling,” as the NRSV and other translations translate. Rather, the shepherds lead the group who speaks in the first common plural (we/us). This group is delivered by the (Judean) shepherds, while the Assyrians are portrayed as the ones threatening the flock. Finally, the Assyrians are “shepherded” with swords to beat them back.

Thus, 5:5-6 anticipates a future time of “peace” when there will be military attacks and political threats from Assyria, but the attacks will not succeed in destroying Judah. This interpretation makes sense of the metaphors in the verses, but it conveys a rather

foreboding promise. These verses promise that Judah will survive the Assyrians, but little else. They imply that the Assyrians will attack but will not ultimately prevail. These verses do not speak of a specific event but of an epoch that lasts from the eighth century through the duration of the seventh. A similar promise, offering hope in spite of the foreboding events of the future, appears in Habakkuk 3:16-18 with respect to the Babylonian invasion. Both texts provide a prophetic foreshadowing of the punishment to come, first in the form of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians.

Micah 5:7-9 constitutes the next thematic unit of group 3, dealing with the remnant of Jacob (see chart [Recurring Introductory Markers]). This thematic unit contains two distinct sayings, each introduced with a nearly identical formula (“and the remnant of Jacob will be . . . in the midst of many peoples”). The first saying (5:7) depicts a scenario whereby the remnant finds itself scattered “in the midst of many peoples”; but rather than assuming this to be a situation of punishment, the imagery conveys the conviction that the remnant will sustain the community. The remnant is compared to the dew that sustains vegetation without human toil.

The second saying (5:8) begins with a nearly identical introduction, but includes an explanatory gloss in the formula: “And the remnants of Jacob will be *among the nations*, in the midst of many peoples [. . .]” The phrase “among the nations” clarifies that this saying refers to the Diaspora population. This second saying differs from the first regarding its presentation of the remnant in that it ascribes military power to the remnant using the image of a lion that terrifies other animals (not unlike the aggressive imagery used of Lady Zion in 4:13).

Micah 5:9 functions as a transitional verse, summarizing the power of the remnant from 5:8 and the threat the remnant poses for its enemies—the topic of 5:10-13. Micah 5:7-9 coalesces around the topic of God’s providential care for a remnant that will ultimately prove to be a force used by God to punish the nations who had taken advantage of God’s people. The poetic parallelism of 5:9 uses “hand” as a metaphor for the power of the remnant that will destroy (“cut off”) the adversaries/enemies (parallel terms). Micah 5:9 returns to a second masculine singular form of address that has not appeared since 5:2, where it was used to address Judah collectively. Thus, 5:9 serves a transitional function by shifting to

the theme of 5:10-14 and by returning to the form of address of 5:2.

YHWH Will Cut Off the Nations, 5:10-15 (MT 5:9-14)

Like the three preceding parts (5:5, 7, 8) of the third group (see [Recurring Introductory Markers]), the concluding unit, 5:10-15, begins with “and it will be,” but this element is followed immediately by the formula “in that day” (see 4:6). This formula maintains the future orientation of most of chapter 5, but shifts to the topic with which 5:9 ended. Micah 5:10-15 consistently reflects YHWH speaking in first person while addressing a masculine singular entity. This style continues through 5:14, with 5:15 offering a summary statement in more generic terms. One Hebrew word dominates this final unit of the chapter, though its translation takes five words in English: “And I will cut off.” This phrase first surfaces just after the introductory formula and appears in the lead position of the next three verses. The quadruple use of “I will cut off” emphasizes the judgment against the adversary mentioned at the end of 5:9. It focuses first on military destruction (horses, chariots, cities, strongholds) and then on the destruction of religious entities used in the worship of other gods (sorcery, idols).

This unit makes a thematic shift from promise to judgment, requiring the reader to account for the shift. Why does the promise to “you” (Judah) in 5:7-9 change to a pronouncement of judgment in 5:10-15? On the one hand, second masculine singular pronouns continue from 5:9, with no *unambiguous* change of antecedent. On the other hand, the shift from deliverance to judgment is so dramatic that the reader must assume a change of addressee with this new unit as it now stands, even if the text was originally addressed to a group within Judah. The second masculine singular references in 5:10-14 would be interpreted as YHWH addressing the enemies rather than Judah. No sense of clarity comes in the context of these verses until one reaches the summary statement in 5:15: “I will execute vengeance on the *nations* that did not obey.” This statement clearly indicates that the judgment in 5:10-14 should be understood in its current location as a pronouncement against the nations/enemies of Judah (whoever the original addressee may have been). In addition, the introductory formula of the unit (“in that

day”) places the action in the same time as the punishment of the enemies in 5:9.

Micah 5:10–11 portrays military destruction, first of the troops (horses and chariots) and then of the country (cities and strongholds). Micah 5:12–13 turns to the destruction of the religious world, beginning with incantations and diviners (sorcery and soothsayers) and then moving to judgment against the elements of false worship (images, pillars, the work of your hands, and sacred poles). All four of these elements involve worshiping things made by humans. On the one hand, these accusations sound like typical prophetic rhetoric denouncing idolatry within Judah (e.g., Isa 42:8; Jer 8:19; Hos 11:2; Mic 1:7). As such, one suspects that this unit was originally directed against YHWH’s own people. On the other hand, the interpretive continuation of 5:15 suggests that the incorporation into this context was not intended as an indictment against Judah, but against the nations. In this respect, 5:15 reframes 5:12–14 and demonstrates a similar attitude to that of 5:8–9, where the remnant of Jacob is used to accomplish retribution against nations.

The Hebrew word translated “sacred pole” by the NRSV in 5:14 is *Asherah*, indicating that a Canaanite deity is being worshiped. This latter image, in particular, lies behind the use of wooden poles in worship to represent *Asherah*. Periodically, she may have been worshiped in the Jerusalem temple as the consort of YHWH, though scholars debate the precise nature of this worship. [Worship of *Asherah* at the Temple] At any

Asherah

Asherah was the consort of El and the mother of the major Canaanite deities. As such, she functioned as a powerful symbol of fertility and power, with the latter often being represented in the form of a lion, and the former represented by the



Two winged protective spirits before the sacred tree of life. Assyrian, c. 865 BCE. From Nimrud, NW Palace, ancient Iraq. British Museum, London, Great Britain (Credit: Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

depiction of a tree, an image with a long history in the iconography of Mesopotamia. The tree symbol depicted above is a relief that comes from the palace of Ashurbanipal (883–859 BCE) in Nimrud. Several types of seals have, however, been found in significant number within Judean and Israelite territory, suggesting the presence of non-Yahwistic worship of Judah during the period of the Judean monarchy. Such seals can be seen in Keel and Uehlinger’s survey of iconography of deities in the ancient Near East.

The examples in the line drawings depicted here include seals from Samaria on the left and Beth-Shemesh on the right.



See Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 151, nos. 179b and 179c. These seals were, respectively, originally published in James L. Kelso, et al., *The Excavations of Bethel (1934–1960)* (AASOR 39; Cambridge MA: 1968) plate 119c; and Alan Rowe, *A Catalogue of Egyptian Scarabs, Scaraboids, Seals, and Amulets in the Palestine Archaeological Museum* (Cairo: 1936), no. S.Q.23. Images used by permission.

Worship of Asherah at the Temple



Archaeological excavations in the twentieth century have demonstrated conclusively that Asherah worship was widespread in ancient Israel. These finds have added significance for understanding the praise of several Judean kings who removed the Asherah from the temple: Asa (1 Kgs 15:13), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:3-4), and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:6, 14-15).

See the recent summary of Asherah worship in Susan Ackerman, "Asherah," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 1:298–99.

rate, the practice of worshiping Asherah was prominent enough to be the subject of several condemnations, especially in the Deuteronomistic History (see Deut 16:21-22; 1 Kgs 15:13; 2 Kgs 18:3-4; 23:6, 14, 15). Micah 5:15 brings the final group of sayings in the chapter to a close with a summary statement. It does not use

“cut off” but uses thematically similar verbs (uproot, destroy, execute vengeance). The direct object of 5:15 leaves no doubt that the punishment of 5:10-14 is directed against the nations, not against Judah.

CONNECTIONS

The nature of Micah 4–5 necessitates careful consideration because of its location in the Book of the Twelve, its understanding of the future, and its artistically structured but materially diverse content.

Leningrad Codex



The Leningrad Codex is the earliest *complete Hebrew manuscript* of the Old Testament. The codex comes from around 1000 CE. After the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, scholars had access to fragments of biblical scrolls dating to 150 BCE.

Appearing immediately after 3:12, the crescendo of Micah 1–3, Micah 4–5 begins the second half of the Book of the Twelve. The prominence of 3:12 is further highlighted by its use in Jeremiah 26:18 as a summation of the message of the prophet Micah. Finally, its position as the middle verse of the Book of the Twelve was

highlighted in the Masoretic notes as indicated by their presence in the Leningrad Codex. [Leningrad Codex]

Collectively, Micah 4–5 focuses on the future by discussing the role of Davidic kingship, the centrality of Zion, the changing role of the nations, and the nature of the remnant community. These four motifs play significant roles in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The first three represent the core emphases of Zion theology, though the specific slant on these motifs in Micah 4–5 represents an interpretive contemplation on their significance for the postexilic community. Nevertheless, the postexilic composition of these chapters should not obscure the fact that they appear within the writing dedicated to the eighth-century prophet Micah. For the reader of the Book of the Twelve, then, Micah 4–5 should

not only be understood as words of warning regarding the coming catastrophe on Judah and Jerusalem but also as words of hope for the remnant community that survives Jerusalem's destruction and exile to Babylon. While they function literarily against the "historical" backdrop of the eighth century, their compilation addresses the needs of the postexilic community. By summarizing, in advance, the events of the seventh and early sixth centuries in the voice of the eighth-century prophet, the tradents (the persons or group responsible for the transmission of a given corpus, text, or source) who compiled Micah and the growing corpus of the Book of the Twelve witness to their belief that YHWH has not abandoned the faithful. These tradents affirm their conviction that YHWH warned Judah of the coming catastrophe. They testify that the promises of YHWH remain valid: the glory of Jerusalem will be restored; a righteous king will lead the people; nations hostile to YHWH will be defeated, and the remnant community will help bring this to fruition.

This interplay between past, present, and future represents the impetus behind the transmission of the Book of the Twelve as a whole. It is not the case that the compilers of Micah 4–5 always wanted to convey specific prophecies that later writings would "fulfill." Rather, the compilers of these chapters felt a strong need to show the coherence of the prophetic message. Decisions of the past affected the present. Decisions of the present will affect the future. When past generations turned their back on YHWH, inevitable consequences ensued. Yet, in their context, they also knew that YHWH did not end the relationship. A remnant survived, and this remnant needed hope that it would be accepted by YHWH and returned to YHWH's good graces. This affirmation happens in the Book of the Twelve in two ways.

First, through teaching about the past, readers learn that the current situation has a history. Prophets confronted earlier generations who refused to listen. Such is the message of Micah 1–3. Had previous generations turned to YHWH, life in the present would have been different. YHWH would have delivered on his promises. YHWH, however, would ultimately have no choice but to punish those who refused to abide by the stipulations of fidelity demanded of YHWH's people. Such is the message of Micah 4–5. Yet the punishment to come would not be the end of the story. YHWH did not plan to abandon Zion or her inhabitants. This promise

about the distant future, from the perspective of Micah, constitutes the second level of affirmation. In Micah 4–5 (as in Hos 2:16–24 and Joel 2:18–27), the future presumes a time of restoration, a time of new beginnings. From the distant perspective of Micah 4–5, that chance for a new beginning looks bright and optimistic, though it omits reference to some dark days to create that picture. However, in the Book of the Twelve, when this promise begins to come to pass (in Haggai–Malachi), one finds that every current generation will have to face the same issues again. Will they listen to YHWH's calls to obedience, justice, and fidelity? Will we?

NOTES

1. Concerning evidence and arguments for postexilic dating, see the following: Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah* (trans. Gary Stansell; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 17–27; and Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micha–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephania* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament 13/3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975) 24–26.

2. E. Kautzsch, GKC (trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) §150g, h.

3. Mark E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Canon in Comparative Perspective* (Scripture in Context IV; ed. B. Batto, W. Hallo, and L. Younger; Lewiston NY: Mellen Press, 1991) 173–94; and Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

4. For example, see Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah*, 145. Wolff considers the verse a later addition that interrupts the connection between 5:2 and 5:4. Andersen and Freedman explore many of the possible variations and provide bibliographic notes to additional literature (Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Micah* [AB 24E; New York: Doubleday, 2000] 468–70).

5. See GK §136a.

TRIAL, VERDICT, AND RESPONSE

Micah 6:1–7:7

COMMENTARY

Micah 6:1–7:7 divides into four rhetorical units that alternate between YHWH speeches and prophetic speeches: 6:1-5, 6-8, 9-16; and 7:1-7. The first unit (6:1-5) begins with YHWH's call to convene a trial and moves to the reading of the charges. The prophet addresses YHWH's expectations and implies the people's guilt in 6:6-8. In 6:9-16, YHWH twice brings words of accusation and judgment on the people. In Micah 7:1-7, the prophet laments the state of his country and waits for God to act. Together, these four units portray Judah's impending punishment, using language that echoes Hosea and Amos while anticipating Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

YHWH Convenes a Trial, 6:1-5

This unit begins with courtroom imagery (see [Lawsuit *rib*] in Hosea 4:1 and [The Lawsuit (*rib*) in Hosea 5:1-7]), which quickly makes it apparent that the fate of Judah hangs in the balance. The unit begins with the instigation of formal proceedings against Judah (6:1-2), followed by the accusations of the wounded party (6:3-5).

Micah 6:1-2 does three things simultaneously: it reorients the reader, returns to the confrontation of Micah 1–3, and displays a similar redactional style to Hosea and Amos. First, the command to listen, combined with the subsequent address to the people using legal language, dramatically reorients the reader/hearer away from the future orientation of chapters 4 and 5, and commands attention as YHWH initiates a lawsuit against the current generation. Second, the call to listen played an important role in structuring the first and last unit in chapters 1–3 (see 1:2; 3:1, 9), so its repetition here emphatically continues the confrontation of those chapters. Third, the

command to listen also played a prominent role in the indictment sections of Hosea and Amos (Hos 4:1; 5:1; Amos 3:1; 4:1; 5:1). This continuity will extend beyond the formal markers to connect with the continuing story of Israel and Judah.

Micah 6:2 proclaims that YHWH has a legal case against the people. The word “controversy” (*rîb*) means something akin to a lawsuit. The lawsuit, however, takes on cosmic proportions when YHWH calls on the mountains and the hills to witness the suit. In the imagery of Micah, this lawsuit becomes an extension of the theophanic language with which the book began. While the theophany report of 1:2–4 only anticipates YHWH’s arrival, YHWH is fully present here. Direct address to the mountains and hills draws attention to the implications for all creation. While uncommon, addressing these entities directly happens elsewhere in the prophetic corpus (e.g., Ezek 6:3; 36:1–7). The trial setting of Micah 6:1–5 also helps explain this language. By calling the beings of crea-

tion to witness, YHWH underscores the solemnity of what is about to unfold in much the same way that Deuteronomy calls upon heaven and earth to witness the covenant made between YHWH and the people (Deut 30:19).

[Deities and Treaties]

In Micah 6:3–5, YHWH, as the wounded party, accuses his people directly, incriminating them first with a rhetorical question: “Oh my people, what have I done to you?” YHWH then answers this question by recounting three specific “saving acts” of deliverance from Israel’s

ancient traditions: the redemption from slavery in Egypt (Exod 1–15), the Balaam story (Num 22–24), and the entry into the land (Joshua). The formulations emphasize YHWH’s role in bringing Israel from slavery into the promised land. YHWH provided leadership to Israel by “sending Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” The reference to Balak and Balaam summarizes the account where the king of Moab paid Balaam to prophesy against Israel, but YHWH caused Balaam to offer three blessings to Israel and a curse of Moab instead. The reference to YHWH taking Israel from Shittim to Gilgal alludes to the site where Israel camped before crossing the Jordan (on Shittim, see Num 25:1; Josh 2:1) and to the first camp established after crossing the Jordan that symbolized the end of

Deities and Treaties



It is not uncommon in the ancient Near East for deities to be called on to validate solemn occasions. For example, a Hittite treaty invokes the names of over fifty deities at the end of the treaty before petitioning them to serve as witnesses: “Let these be witnesses to this treaty and to the oath.” These same deities are called on to destroy or to protect the signatory, depending on whether Duppit-Tessub remains faithful to the treaty or not.

See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 205.

their slavery (on Gilgal, see Josh 5:9). In short, YHWH claims his actions toward this people from the distant past are characterized by salvific motives.

Prophetic Reminder of YHWH's Expectations, 6:6-8

Undoubtedly the most famous passage in Micah, this rhetorical unit reflects profoundly on the question of what it means to be a person of faith. The passage contains two interconnected sections as the speaker changes from 6:6-7 (an unidentified individual, addressed as “human”) to 6:8 (the prophetic response). The unnamed speaker asks a series of questions with cultic, literary, theological, and ethical implications. Micah 6:8 then provides the prophet’s response, with a statement that in many ways could be classified as a description of biblical ethics in a nutshell.

The unnamed speaker asks about obedience and right standing before YHWH, wondering how much sacrifice it takes to please this God. To a certain extent, the questions hold the cultic apparatus up to satirical scrutiny. If YHWH wants burnt offerings and year-old calves, why not multiply the offerings by a thousand or ten thousand? If killing an animal as a sacrifice will impress YHWH, then would YHWH not be more impressed with child sacrifice (“give my firstborn for my transgression”; “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul”)? The absurdity of ritual slaughter stands in dramatic relief to the desires of YHWH, who wants people to act with justice.

The questions, however, are not posed to complain about the burden of cultic ritual but to caricature the cultic elements in order to make a point about the nature of YHWH’s commands. [Critique of

Cult] The point of this unit is that YHWH does not need the blood of animals; YHWH desires behavior that embodies justice (*mišpāṭ*) and kindness (*hesed*) in a life showing deference to YHWH. [Justice and Kindness]

While it is often noted that the power of the divine response comes from the way it sums up three crucial aspects of a life of faith (kindness [*hesed*], justice, and humility before God), seldom do commentators focus on the initial

Critique of Cult



See previous discussions of prophets and critique of the cult in [Prophet vs. Priest] in Hos 6:6; [Cultic “Parties”] in Amos 2:8; and in the commentary on Amos 6:6.

Justice and Kindness

“Kindness” (Hebrew *hesed*) is one of the recurring key words of Hosea (2:21; 4:1; 6:4, 6; 10:12; 12:7), while “justice” (Hebrew *mišpāṭ*) plays a prominent role in the sayings of Amos (5:7, 15, 24; 6:12). The Hebrew word translated as “kindness” implies much more than positive actions toward others. It connotes a deep, abiding sense of covenant loyalty that manifests itself in actions toward others as part of one’s covenantal relationship with God. Justice connotes doing right before God and others.

Wait on God and the Book of the Twelve



While Hos 12:6 admonishes one to “wait” on YHWH and Mic 6:8 admonishes one to “walk humbly” with God, the extended unit of Mic 6:1–7:7 ends with a prophetic affirmation that “I will wait on the God of my salvation.” This intriguing resolution to the admonitions of Hos 12:6 becomes all the more interesting when one notes that Mic 7:7 uses the verb for “wait,” which in turn links forward to Habakkuk rather than backward to Hosea (see discussion of Mic 7:1-7 and the Book of the Twelve; see also Aaron Schart, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftenebergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* [BZAW 260; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998] 246–51).

aspect of 6:8. The verse begins with a rejoinder that what follows is nothing new: “He has declared to you, O human” However, Micah contains no such statement, so what happens if one asks the obvious question, Where has such thinking been declared? The failure to explain this claim reflects too narrow a literary horizon. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there a better candidate for the source of this claim than in Hosea 12:6 (MT 12:7): “But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love (*hesed*) and justice (*mišpāt*), and wait continually for your God.” While Hosea 12:6 varies slightly from Micah 6:8, similar formulations connect the

two: true believers are to deal positively with others and to wait on God to act. [Wait on God and the Book of the Twelve]

Two Accusations and Verdicts, 6:9-16

Micah 6:9-16 contains a call to attention (6:9) followed by a double pronouncement of guilt. Though difficult to translate, the call to attention clearly does two things: it introduces a quote from YHWH, and it demands the attention of the city (= Jerusalem). The answer (6:10-16) constitutes the heart of this thematic subunit. It pronounces judgment against YHWH’s people because of the greed and violence so deeply embedded in their society. Twice in this complex unit, the message alternates between accusation (6:10-12, 16a) and verdicts (13-15, 16b). The unit appears complex, however, not because of its translational difficulties but because of the echoes of motifs within the Book of the Twelve and the Deuteronomistic History.

The first unit of accusation begins with a series of three rhetorical questions (6:10-11) and a summary (6:12), spoken with the dual purpose of stating something about God and of challenging human behavior. The questions are posed by YHWH, asking whether sin still corrupts and whether (or how long) YHWH should tolerate evil.

The NRSV does not convey the full sense of 6:10. A rendering that takes better account of the parallel syntax would be, “Are there yet storehouses of wickedness in the house of wickedness, or indignation at the scant measure?” The text is difficult to translate, but

three key terms help to explain the thrust. First, the word “yet” is textually undisputed, but the NRSV ignores it. Nevertheless, “yet” implies an enduring problem that is not readily explained in Micah. Second, “House of Wickedness” evokes Amos and Hosea. Bethel, which means “house of God,” receives multiple condemnations in both books (see Hos 10:15; 12:4; Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5–6), and Amos associates Bethel with sin. Third, the “scant measure” alludes to the charges of Amos 8:5, which condemn the use of false measures in public transactions. Accordingly, Micah 6:10 levies this accusation against the Jerusalem temple because it functions as a center of sinfulness. Specifically, it condemns the lack of indignation over these ethical abuses. This transfer of the sin of Israel to Judah was a prominent theme in the opening section of Micah (1:5–7, 9), and it continues to function as a driving hermeneutic in 6:1–7:7.

Ethical violations remain as the focus of the rhetorical question in 6:11: Can I tolerate wicked scales? It again evokes a motif prominent in the accusatory language of Hosea and Amos. Whereas Amos 8:5 and Hosea 12:7 condemn those using false balances in their business dealings, Micah 6:12 emphasizes that the problems run throughout the population. The charges of violence and deception on a societal level are sweeping generalizations that portray a population whose behavior bears little resemblance to the behavior expected of YHWH’s people.

God’s verdict begins in 6:13, where punishment involves YHWH striking down the country because of its cheating, violence, and greed. The verdict continues in 6:14–15 with a pronouncement that the people will experience hunger and military devastation. The description of hunger depicts an extended time of suffering when people will have barely enough to survive. They will try to put aside supplies for another day, but that day will not come because of a military attack. This threat works on several levels simultaneously. On one level, the description of devastation paints a bleak picture. On another level, the depiction of an extended period when there is not enough food to eat and when a military threat looms on the horizon represents a complete contrast to the time of peace and plenty promised in Micah 4:3–4, which speaks of armaments converted to agricultural tools and a life of serenity sitting in verdant, fertile orchards and vineyards. This contrast is not so much a reversal of a promise as it is a reminder of the distant

time frame for that promise (see discussion of the future orientation in Mic 4–5). The peace and fertility of the land anticipated in 4:3–4 will not happen before YHWH’s punishment, which will then bring the opposite: infertility of the land (resulting in a lack of food) and war. On yet another level, readers aware of the meta-historical narrative in the Twelve can hardly escape the sense of foreboding at what lies ahead for Judah. These images of want and military threat, poetic though they may be, suggest an extended siege. In this respect, the threat of Micah 6:14–15 does double duty. In the short term, it evokes memories of Sennacherib’s siege in 701 BCE when Jerusalem nearly fell to the Assyrians. In the long run, however, attentive readers cannot escape the nagging sense of doom hanging over Jerusalem in the Book of the Twelve on its march to the destruction of 587 at the hands of the Babylonians.

This unit concludes with a second accusation/punishment cycle, involving a rationale for punishment in the form of an accusation (6:16a) and a verdict (6:16b). The verdict announces devastation and humiliation to Judah and Jerusalem as a consequence of its decision to follow the lead of Israel’s worst kings. **[Jerusalem Emphasis]** The accusation draws upon the story of YHWH’s people in much the same manner as the beginning of the unit (see 6:3–5). However,

Jerusalem Emphasis



The NRSV smooths over a change of suffixes in 6:16b. The pertinent phrase of the NRSV (“I will make you a desolation and *your* inhabitants an object of hissing”) actually ignores a third feminine singular pronoun whose antecedent can only refer to Zion (“I will make you a desolation and *her* inhabitants an object of hissing”).

instead of alluding to the exodus story or the conquest narrative of Israel’s early period, it alludes to the House of Omri and the House of Ahab. **[Omri and Ahab]** The difference in these allusions is also noteworthy. The allusions contrast YHWH’s salvific acts in bringing the people out of slavery into the promised land (6:4–5) with the people’s imitation of the worst kings of

Israel. The fact that Micah directs its message to Judah (the southern kingdom), condemning it for following the path of the worst of the *northern* kingdom, not only conveys a severe insult to Judah’s fidelity but also returns to the theme that opened Micah: Judah has followed Israel’s example rather than learning from it.

The Prophet Laments the State of the Country, 7:1–7

The speaker changes in 7:1, but the judgment theme continues. Consequently, 7:1–7 responds to the judgment pronouncement of 6:1–16. Formally, the identity of the one responding could be one

Omri and Ahab



The mention of the northern kings of days past, Omri and Ahab who ruled Israel about a century and a half before Hezekiah, plays on the negative theological assessments of their reigns in the book of Kings. Omri was the father of Ahab. He ruled a dynasty that, historically, oversaw one of the most economically prosperous periods of the northern kingdom, but one that the Deuteronomistic Historian condemns as ruled by the two worst kings of Israel. Omri's twelve-year reign is described relatively briefly in 1 Kgs 16:16-28, a mere twelve verses. Omri came to power after killing Zimri, his predecessor, who had reigned for only seven days. Omri moved the capital from Tirzah to Samaria, but apart from that he receives fairly typical condemnation from the historian for "walking in the way of Jeroboam," a recurring refrain against Israel's kings. So the reader is surprised to learn in 1 Kgs 16:25 that Omri "did more evil than all those who were before him," a statement made only of Omri (in the north) and Manasseh (in the south, 2 Kgs 21:9). However, Omri's fame as the worst king does not last long. Omri dies and is replaced by his son Ahab, and his story extends formally for six chapters

(1 Kgs 16:26–22:40). However, Ahab's death does not end his presence in Kings since between Ahab's descendants and the cross referencing of the kings of Judah who ruled during the reign of Ahab (1 Kgs 22:41), Ahab is mentioned twenty-seven times until Jehu kills the seventy sons of Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1-30). Even then, Manasseh, a seventh-century Judean king is compared to Ahab (2 Kgs 21:6, 13). Given the long shadow cast by Ahab in Kings, it is no surprise to the reader when his reign is summarized shortly after the account of Omri's death notice (1 Kgs 16:28) in a form that distinctly highlights his wickedness in the eyes of the Deuteronomistic Historian: "And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him" (1 Kgs 16:31). In short, according to the Deuteronomistic Historian, while Omri was the worst king to that point, Ahab surpassed him by leaps and bounds. The selection of Omri and Ahab in Mic 6:16, thus has a polemical undertone to it that should not be overlooked.

of two entities: the prophet or Lady Zion, but it is more likely to be the prophet. [The Speaker of Micah 7:1-7] Micah 7:1-7 unfolds with three movements: a pronouncement of lamentation (7:1), a depiction of the sorry state of affairs in the land as the reason for the lamentation (7:2-6), and a prophetic affirmation of trust (7:7). Both the opening and concluding verses of this unit echo language found elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve.

Micah 7 opens with a prophetic response drawing on the form of a lamentation. The speaker utilizes an extended metaphor to compare the plight of the pious to one facing starvation after the harvest has failed. Micah 7:2-7 describes the land as full of violence, deception, and dishonesty. This analogy of the land as a failed crop should be assumed in 7:2-7.

Having heard language in Micah 6:1, 8, 10-11 reminiscent of Amos, when Micah 7:1 uses the infertility of the land as a metaphor to describe the current state of affairs, one sees how it both echoes and contrasts with the language of Amos, the first of several connections to other parts of the Book of the Twelve in these verses. [Micah 7:1-7 and the Book of the Twelve]

The entire society is in disarray in 7:2-6. These verses lay out a series of charges, but the main accusations concern the lack of piety

The Speaker of Micah 7:1-7



On a thematic level, it makes little difference whether the prophet or Zion speaks. In either case, the unit condemns the actions of the people in light of 6:9-16, and the placement of this unit as a response to 6:9-16 surely intends such associations. For following the rhetorical logic of the context, however, it may be helpful to explore the reasons why the prophet as speaker works better than the others.

A case for the speaker as the prophet or Zion can be made. Either speaker could be distinguished from the community at large: Lady Zion, speaking as the city, often comments on the state of affairs for her children,

and the prophetic voice often speaks against the wealthy in society. The extended context offers limited help since the speaker in 7:8-10 is clearly Zion (see discussion of those verses), but the prophet also joins the conversation later in the chapter (see 7:14a, 18-20). Thus, the speaker in 7:1-7 remains ambiguous at first. The speaker's final statement in 7:7 ("I will wait for the God of my salvation"), however, makes more sense as a statement from the prophet than from Lady Zion. Thus, 7:1-7 makes better sense as the prophet's response to 6:1-16, while Lady Zion speaks in 7:8-10 in response to both 6:1-16 and 7:1-7.

and the presence of injustice. The passage castigates Judah's political officials and judges as conspirators in perverting justice. What the official desires, the judge delivers for a price. Both act from avarice and greed, and these are the leaders of the country. Micah 7:4 uses a botanical metaphor to describe the leaders of society (the best of them, the upright) as useless plants (brier, thorn bush) that serve no purpose other than to perpetuate their own existence at the expense of others. As a result, judgment lies around the corner in the form of an enemy attack. While strained syntactically, the reference to this punishment is clear: "(It is a) day of your sentinels; your punishment has come." The imagery connotes an enemy attack against the people, an attack designed to punish Judah.

Micah 7:5-6 continues the dissection of the society's ills by turning from the leaders of society to friends and lovers who cannot be trusted, and to family members who turn on one another. The resulting picture culminates in a devastating accusation against society—one in which no one can trust another. At every level of society, from government to family, the prophet sees greed, distrust, and enmity.

Nevertheless, a prophetic affirmation of trust closes this unit in 7:7. In contrast to society at large, the prophet vows to wait for "the God of my salvation." This action runs parallel to the response of Habakkuk, the next prophetic voice confronting Judah in the Book of the Twelve (see [Micah 7:1-7 and the Book of the Twelve] and Hab 3:16, 18).

Micah 7:1-7 and the Book of the Twelve

ΑΩ For the reader of the Twelve, Mic 7:1, 4, 7 provide imagery that connects to Amos, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. In Mic 7:1, “summer fruit” evokes powerful associations with the fourth vision of Amos (8:1-3), where “summer fruit” (*qayış*) signals the “end” (*qēš*) of the northern kingdom and the onset of “wailing” (*y/l*) in the temple (Amos 8:3). These elements recur in Mic 7:1, where the failure of the “summer fruit” signals the state of affairs for the pious respondent who laments (*ʿallay*) the implications for the land. In addition, the depiction of the poor harvest in Mic 7:1 reflects the exact opposite of the fertility promise of Amos 9:13. In Amos 9:13, the land is promised to be so fertile that the harvest will still be underway when it is time to plant the seed. By contrast in Mic 7:1, the harvest is over, but there is nothing to eat. Thus, by comparing these evocative images, one can say that the situation in Mic 7:1 moves the action in the Book of the Twelve forward for the attentive reader in three ways: by heightening a sense of impending doom for Judah, by presuming a delay of promise, and by changing the target of YHWH’s wrath from Israel to Judah. “Summer fruit” and wailing in Amos brought the pronouncement of the end to Israel; its presence here does no less for Judah. Hope for the return of abundance in the land in Amos seems far removed in the assessment of Mic 7:1.

The syntax of Mic 7:4b is strained, in part because one of the two terms for the day (your sentinels/punishment) has been added to foreshadow the context in the growing Book of the Twelve. The “day of your sentinels” is the one that is extraneous syntactically, but both phrases evoke connections to other points in the Twelve. The reference to the “day of your watchers” literally anticipates the action of Habakkuk as a sentinel (Hab 2:1). The day of your punishment echoes language elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve that anticipates

judgment (especially Zeph 1:8-9; 3:7; but see also Amos 3:2, 14 where this language was applied to Israel).

Finally, Mic 7:7 concludes this unit by providing a prophetic affirmation of confidence in YHWH, the “God of my salvation” who “will *hear* me.” This affirmation contrasts the prophet’s response to the unreliability of humans with the utter reliability on YHWH, but it also leads the attentive reader of the Book of the Twelve forward as it echoes the general outline of Habakkuk. Mic 7:7 (in context) essentially depicts a prophetic figure who laments (7:1) over the violence and dishonesty that pervades the land (7:2-6), which this figure knows will result in divine punishment, described as a day of your sentinels (from the root *šāpâh*, 7:4). For his part, the prophet affirms he will watch (*šāpâh*, 7:7) and wait (*yāḥal*, 7:7) upon “the God of my salvation” (7:7). This action foreshadows the general outline of the book of Habakkuk. Nahum deals with the downfall of Assyria, but a prophetic voice only really addresses Judah directly when it calls for Judah to rejoice at Nineveh’s downfall (Nah 1:15). The image of the prophet expectantly (and impatiently) waiting for YHWH to respond to the violence and dishonesty within the land, however, resumes in Hab 1:2-4. Habakkuk opens with a plaintive cry, which in many ways picks up where Mic 7:1-7 leaves off: “*How long*, YHWH, must I cry for help and you *not hear*?” (Hab 1:2) Calamity, violence, and injustice prevail (Hab 1:3-4) and call for response from YHWH. The prophet, assured that punishment is coming (1:5-11), goes to the wall to watch (*šāpâh*, 2:1), where he receives assurance that the wicked will be punished, but in two stages. First, YHWH will send a nation (Babylon) to punish Judah, but Babylon will also be punished. By the end of the book, the prophet hears and waits with trepidation for the coming “day of distress” (3:16), though while he waits, he “will exult in the *God of my salvation*” (3:18).

CONNECTIONS

In abbreviated form, Micah 7:1-7 presents a prophetic response to the Assyrian crisis that parallels the prophetic response to YHWH sending the Babylonians in Habakkuk. In Micah, the prophet laments (Mic 7:1) because the society teems with greed, violence, and injustice (7:2-6). The prophet recounts his decision to wait and affirms his conviction that YHWH will hear his plea because YHWH is the “God of my salvation” (7:7). In Habakkuk, the

prophet laments the violence, the lack of law, and the disappearance of justice (Hab 1:2-4). YHWH promises to send the Babylonians to punish Judah (1:5-11), which causes the prophet to fear the punishment (1:12-17) before going to the wall to await a sign (2:1), which comes in the form of a vision that the end will come (2:2-3) because so much greed has filled the land (2:4-20). Habakkuk's vision implies a twofold movement: an attack from the enemy to punish Judah is followed by YHWH's attack against the same enemy (3:3-15, see especially 3:13). This future attack terrifies the prophet, who "waits" for this "day of calamity" (3:16) and affirms YHWH is "the God of my salvation" (3:18). The parallels between Micah and Habakkuk are thematic but punctuated with enough verbal echoes that one can hardly miss their significance. The threat of Assyria will recede for a time (see Mic 7:8-20), and Assyria will pass from the scene (Nahum), but when injustice, violence, and lawlessness return (Hab 1:2-4), YHWH will not withhold punishment again (1:6-17).

In what context does one hear Micah 6:1–7:7? In its literary context, it falls within an eighth-century setting that evokes echoes of the impending Assyrian incursion. The voice of the prophet confronts a people with accusations that their own inattention to the demands of YHWH (justice, *hesed*, and humility before God [6:8]) has endangered the land to a degree that YHWH cannot ignore. Thus, the country will soon be granted a stay of execution from its enemy (see 7:8-20).


This literary context assumes knowledge of Judah's story on several levels. The end of the eighth century saw Judah threatened by Assyrian occupation. Jerusalem itself would withstand siege from Sennacherib in 701 BCE. Though most of Judah was conquered, Jerusalem was allowed to survive, but it became a *de facto* vassal state. Nevertheless, its reprieve opened up possibilities for survival of its primary institutions: the Davidic monarchy and the cult. Yet the story of Israel from the past also plays a prominent role in this extended unit. The passage evokes the story of YHWH's deliverance from slavery and the gift of the land (Mic 6:4-5). It contrasts YHWH's acts of salvation with Judah's adoption of patterns reminiscent of Omri/Ahab (6:16)—northern kings depicted in highly polemical terms in Kings (e.g., 1 Kgs 16:25-26 [Omri]; 16:30-31 [Ahab]). In this literary context, Micah 6:1–7:7 creates a lengthy pause, forcing the reader to evaluate the salvific acts of

YHWH against the people's betrayal of YHWH (7:2-6). Yet hope remains for the prophet: hope that the past is a prelude to a brighter day. This hope will be more fully explored in 7:8-20.

Still, this literary context is not the only context by which readers are called to hear 6:1–7:7. This text also needs to be heard in its compositional context. Undoubtedly the product of exilic reflection, the hope with which it ends becomes a statement of faith that YHWH has not abandoned a people, even as the passage assumes that the guilt of the people caused Jerusalem's destruction. Imagine the options available. The capital city was gone; its monarchy and its temple were destroyed. As the community's intellectual and spiritual leaders considered what had happened, they could have chosen to worship the Babylonian god, since some would have seen Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem as a sign that Babylon's god was more powerful. They could have chosen to see the world as chaotic, having no sense of justice, no divine power to whom to turn. They could have chosen this path and ignored all religious dimensions of life. They could have simply taken all they could from this life while they were living. Or they could have become self-critical, asking whether their own behavior contributed to the destruction of their city. Among these options, they chose the latter. They recalled the words of prophets who challenged their greed and insensitivity, and they knew they had failed God long before God had left them to their own devices. They recorded this observation for perpetuity.

In our modern context, persons of faith may respond differently to this text. We may dismiss the rhetoric of the prophet's accusations as hyperbole. We may recoil at the idea that God would punish an entire nation for the misdeeds of a few by threatening to send hunger and military attacks their way. We may smugly deem the prophet's culture as ancient and inferior. We could benignly suggest that our society has structures in place to avoid the kind of rampant societal greed where one has to bribe a judge to get a case heard. **[Justice vs. Greed]** In our world, well-meaning people of faith may not resonate with a culture accused of idolatry and child sacrifice. Such ideas would, however, miss the enduring point of this passage. This passage, no matter how one sees the incidentals of the accusations, lays open the human condition, which has not changed in the 2,500 years since these words were penned. When God is removed from the picture, and when human beings see no

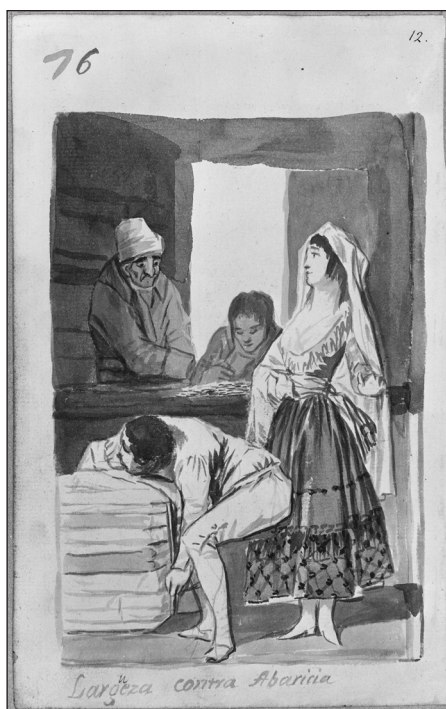
Justice vs. Greed

 In contrast to Micah, American society often glorifies wealth and fame. In the film *Wall Street* (1987), Oliver Stone critiques the win-at-all-cost attitude of corporate capitalism with character Gordon Gekko, who speaks the famous lines that in many respects function as the antithesis of Micah's call for social justice:

Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures, the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A.

While Gekko goes to jail in the end, more people remember him than the hero of the film. In 2010 the sequel to the 1987 film was released, and Gordon Gekko is the main character who continues from the earlier film.

The social implications of greed and hubris can be seen as a matter of justice in the picture here, drawn by the late eighteenth-century Dutch artist, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes. The picture, aptly titled *Generosity versus Greed*, puts the well heeled aristocrat in stark relief as she looks down her nose at the poorly clothed shop keepers while the workman strains to load her purchase of fine fabrics. This contrast raises the same question of social justice raised by Mic 7:2-6: What responsibility comes with wealth?



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828). *Generosity versus Greed*. 1796–1797. Brush and gray wash on laid Netherlandish paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York NY. (Credit: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY)

purpose in life beyond themselves, then life can lose a sense of wonder and purpose. For people without God, justice is just a word; kindness is merely a strategy employed to enhance one's position; and humility becomes pointless.

In our day, hiding greed and violence has become a sophisticated art, but the effects of these vices are no less damaging. We try to crawl our way to the top of corporations without worrying about who we hurt along the way. We allow lobbyists to influence legislation based on how much money they contribute, not based on reason and genuine commitment to establishing what is best for society. We send dysfunctional families onto TV shows to entertain us with their problems, deluding ourselves into thinking that our problems seem small by comparison. “God” in public life becomes part of a campaign slogan or the means by which late-night televangelists manipulate people who are vulnerable. These actions, in our society, make us cynical. We isolate ourselves from “those people” by pointing fingers at “them” to make ourselves feel better. We blame those less fortunate than ourselves for their plight. Or,

worse, we “do what we need to do” to get our share of the pie and become like them. Indeed, our society can hardly deem itself superior to the prophet’s society.

So what are people of faith to do? Do we merely wait in our own private world for the God of our salvation? Do we merely wait and hope that God will hear? Do we resign ourselves to passive resistance while we look to God to solve the problem? Here again, the answer comes from long ago. God has told us what is good and what is required: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. It is not enough to long for justice. We must practice it, and we must demand it from those we put in office. It is not enough to feel bad for those in need. We need to love kindness (*hesed*); we need to live our lives in relationship to God in ways that show that relationship affects our lives. We need to give to those in need (economically, emotionally, and spiritually) because of what God has provided us. Loving kindness (*hesed*), however, does not mean to drop coins in the charity box at Christmas time. It means to act, concretely, in a way that shows our actions result from our relationship to God. To paraphrase the words of Jesus, “How you act toward one of the ‘least of these’ is how you act toward me” (Matt 25:40). Our lives become our testimony to God and others. When we fail and when we fall short of what God would have us do, we need to continue the journey. We need to continue to walk with God. Yet we need to recognize our shortcomings and those of others. We need to remember that others will fail us as we have failed them. We need to remember that there but for the grace of God go I. We need to recall the times when we failed others, and we need to wait on God. We cannot save the world alone, but justice, kindness, and humility before God are the cornerstones of a life well lived.

CALL FOR A REPRIEVE AS IN THE DAYS OF OLD

Micah 7:8-20

COMMENTARY

Micah 7:8-20 has been treated as a postexilic text since the nineteenth century, and its alternating speakers have long gained it a reputation as some type of liturgical piece. It has also largely been interpreted as a unit composed independently of the book. The first two of these opinions make good sense, but the idea that 7:8-20 was compiled independently of the book has created numerous problems for interpreting the passage. At the very least, to interpret this passage in its context requires that one ask why it is here and how it functions in Micah and in the Book of the Twelve. To answer these questions, one must recognize that the passage is no random collection of sayings. Rather, the sayings evoke motifs and vocabulary associated with the Hezekiah and Isaiah traditions, especially as found in the Anti-Assyrian polemic of Isaiah 10.¹ In this respect, it will be treated here as a late composition that is intended to be read as a prophetic liturgy set in the time of Hezekiah (725–696 BCE) at the end of the eighth century, but whose message anticipates the fate of Judah over the seventh century.

The five subunits of this passage reveal themselves in the change of speaker and addressee (hence the classification “liturgy”). The first subunit (7:8-10) conveys a speech *by* Lady Zion to Lady Nineveh, though the addressees must be deduced from the context and linguistic markers. The second subunit presents a complex address *to* Zion in 7:11-13. Next, one finds a prophetic prayer of intercession and YHWH’s brief response (7:14-15), followed by a prophetic address to the people (7:16-17) and the people’s response in the form of a hymnic prayer (7:18-20).

Lady Zion and Lady Nineveh, 7:8-10

Formally, Micah 7:8-10 does not immediately convey the impression of a new speech, since the first person style also framed the prophetic accusation in 7:1-7. Nevertheless, direct address (second feminine singular) of an enemy in 7:8, rather than the people, is surprising. More important, the end of 7:8-10 contains a rhetorical quote from that enemy (which also uses second feminine singular address) directed back to the speaker, formally making this a discourse spoken by one feminine figure to another. The feminine speaker must be Lady Zion, though the enemy remains unnamed. The reasons for this anonymity, as with several passages in Micah 4–6, reflect the dual function of this passage, which both references the Assyrian crisis of the late eighth century and foreshadows the Babylonian exile of the sixth century. A series of echoes in 7:8-20 recalls the anti-Assyrian polemic of Isaiah 9–10 and suggests that the primary identification of the enemy should be conceived as Lady Nineveh (the capital city of Assyria personified).² In addition, this reference makes sense in the structure of the book, since Micah 1:1 designates Hezekiah as the final king under whom the prophet worked, and since Isaiah 10 is also best understood as addressing the siege of Sennacherib toward the end of Hezekiah's reign. In short, an ancient reader of the book would likely have assumed Assyria as the unnamed enemy given the book's literary setting, though the time of its composition undoubtedly comes from the Persian period.

Thus, in 7:8-10 Lady Zion addresses Lady Nineveh, each character personifying the capital of her respective kingdom (Judah and Assyria). The speech itself assumes Lady Zion accepts her punishment as temporary, but she refuses to be taunted by Lady Nineveh: "Do not rejoice over me; though I fall, I shall rise." She recognizes

YHWH's Promise to Zion



The imagery of this affirmation comes close to the imagery of Trito-Isaiah (60:1-2), where YHWH speaks directly to Lady Zion (2fs) about her imminent restoration, telling her, "Arise (2fs), shine (2fs); for your (2fs) light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you (2fs). For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you (2fs), and his glory will appear over you (2fs)."

her ensuing punishment as coming from YHWH, but claims YHWH will ultimately vindicate her (7:9). [YHWH's Promise to Zion] The final verse (7:10) of this speech intones another affirmation, namely that Lady Nineveh will herself be shamed because she had taunted Lady Zion ("Where is YHWH, your [2fs] God?"). Lady Nineveh will be "trampled like mud in the streets," a notion

that anticipates the description of Nineveh's overthrow in Nahum 3. [Micah 7:10 and Nahum 3:14]

Zion's Reprieve and Judgment, 7:11-13

Micah 7:11-13 presents the most complex subunit in 7:8-20. The speaker and addressee change with 7:11. The prophet becomes the speaker in 7:11, while Lady Zion becomes the addressee (instead of the speaker as in 7:8-10). The complexity becomes further apparent when one tries to make sense of the sequence of the three verses. They begin with a promise (7:11) but end with judgment (7:13), while 7:12 can be read as both a promise and a threat.

Micah 7:11 offers a word of promise to Lady Zion that can refer to two possible situations: an exilic setting and an eighth-century setting. Concerning the exilic setting, the verb "to build" can also mean "to rebuild," and many have read this verse as a promise to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in the aftermath of the return from exile, a feat not completed until 445 BCE under Nehemiah. Micah 7:11 thus comes close to the prophetic promise described in Ezra 9:9: ". . . yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, *to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem.*" In this sense, the promise of Micah 7:11 also comes close to the exilic texts of Isaiah 58:12 and Amos 9:11. Isaiah 58:12 states, "Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called *the repairer of the breach*, the restorer of streets to live in." In addition, the Book of the Twelve manifests a similar promise in Amos 9:11: "On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and *repair its breaches*, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old." The word "repair" in Isaiah 58:12 and Amos 9:11 means "to wall up," essentially the work of a mason.

Micah 7:11 can also be read against the backdrop of the eighth century as a prediction of a reprieve given to Jerusalem. By assuming the lexical clusters in Micah 7:8-20 allude to Isaiah 10,

Micah 7:10 and Nahum 3:14

ΑΩ A poignant connection appears in the Book of the Twelve with Lady Zion's anticipation that Nineveh will become a "trampling place" (*mirmās*) like "mud" (*tīt*) in the streets in 7:10. These two motifs are combined in the taunt addressed to Lady Nineveh (Nah 3:14-15), though with idiomatic variation. She is told to prepare for the coming invasion, though her preparations for battle will be useless: "go into the mud" (*tīt*) and "trample (*ramas*) in the clay." While this is not a direct quote, and cannot even be definitively isolated as a deliberate allusion, it uses the same noun (*tīt*) and the same root (*rms*) addressed to the same character, Lady Nineveh. In the canonical order, one can even read the two verses as a prediction and (ironic) fulfillment. In Nah 3:14, she is told to enter the mud and trample the clay, thus essentially *doing to herself* (in a futile effort to save herself) what Lady Zion anticipates will happen to her in Mic 7:10: she becomes a place of trampling like mud in the street.

one hears the promise in 7:11 differently. These allusions, cumulatively, evoke reminiscence of the period of the Sennacherib siege of 701 BCE when the Assyrians threatened to take Jerusalem even while conquering most of the Judean villages. In this respect, one can hardly miss the double meaning of the passage as a reprieve from Assyria for Zion. A promise of “a day” to build/rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to extend its borders could also be heard as a promise to undo what the Assyrians had done. Specifically, tradition associates Hezekiah with building a second wall in Jerusalem as well as incorporating a water source into the fortifications of the city in response to the impending Assyrian threat (2 Chr 32:1-5; 2 Kgs 20:20).

Micah 7:12-13 can also be read with two different meanings. Read with 7:11, Micah 7:12 appears to be a promise of the return of the diaspora: “They will come to you from Egypt to Assyria, and from Egypt to the River, from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain.” Nevertheless, the next verse, 7:13, dramatically shifts the message from promise to devastation: “But the land will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the fruit of their doings.”

This radical change from promise in 7:11 to judgment in 7:13 is complicated by the hinge verse of 7:12. The negative message of 7:13 forces one to look twice at 7:12, and when one does so, one realizes that the action of 7:12 is more ambiguous than it appeared when read merely as a continuation of 7:11. Micah 7:12 says “they will come to you,” but “they” are never identified. In actuality, the phrase “come to” does not specify the motives of those who are coming, and the phrase can be used to describe a military incursion (Judg 9:52) or another arrival that leads to negative consequences (Judg 15:14). Thus, when 7:12 is read with 7:11, it appears to be a promise, but when it is read with 7:13, it appears to provide the rationale for destruction: they will come to you . . . and the land will be destroyed. Seen in this light, 7:11 foreshadows the political realities of the seventh to sixth centuries in a remarkably prescient (albeit poetic) manner as it describes, in sequence, the foreign occupations by Assyria, Egypt, Babylon (“the river”), and the surrounding regions (“sea to sea and mountain to mountain”).

Micah 7:13 states that the *ʾereṣ* (which can mean “earth” or “land”) will become desolate. The NRSV translates it as “earth” here, but given that the addressee is Lady Zion, and that 7:13 must be read in relation to the context, there is nothing to suggest a uni-

versal judgment. Rather, when read as a prophetic word from the vantage point of the eighth century, Micah 7:12-13 appears to foreshadow the destruction of the land of Judah, not the entire world.

Prophetic Prayer of Intercession and YHWH's Brief Response, 7:14-15

Micah 7:14-15 contains a prophetic prayer and a divine response, though the response is not clear from the NRSV. The prophetic voice petitions YHWH (7:14-15a), asking YHWH to act as shepherd to the people as when bringing them out of Egypt. This prayer references the exodus story as a sign of YHWH's deliverance of YHWH's people. In this respect, it assumes the judgment against the land in 7:13 by calling on YHWH to bring the people out of bondage, further evidence that 7:12-13 refers to the coming occupations of Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. Calling on YHWH to act as shepherd bypasses any mention of a king, probably reflecting a time after Jerusalem's destruction, when Judah had no king of its own.

Micah 7:15b provides a brief, affirmative response from YHWH, but one that is misunderstood by the NRSV. The NRSV emends the Hebrew text ("I will show him

marvelous things") so that it becomes a petition to YHWH from the people ("show us marvelous things"). While the emendation only involves changing a single Hebrew letter, no textual support exists for such a reading, and the change involves letters not easily confused (a *he* [h;] rather than an *'aleph* [a] as the first letter). The NRSV is unique among modern translations in treating 7:15 as a continuation of the prophetic speaker of 7:15. The RSV and NIV better reflect MT at this point. [\[Translating Micah 7:15\]](#) In any event, this prayer and response assume YHWH will act again to bring YHWH's people from slavery in a foreign country to freedom in the land of promise. In this respect, following logically upon the

Gilead



"Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead"

(Credit: Jim Pitts)

Translating Micah 7:15

ΑΩ The RSV and the NIV offer better translations of 7:15 than does the NRSV.

NRSV: ¹⁴Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you, which lives alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. ¹⁵As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, *show us* marvelous things.

RSV: ¹⁴Shepherd thy people with thy staff, the flock of thy inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. ¹⁵As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt *I will show them* marvelous things.

NIV: ¹⁴Shepherd thy people with thy staff, the flock of thy inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. ¹⁵As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt *I will show them* marvelous things.

pronouncement of 7:12-13, 7:14-15 addresses a people in exile, not the community in the eighth century.

The Prophet Addresses the People, 7:16-17

Micah 7:16-17 responds to the promise of 7:15b by affirming that the nations will see YHWH's aid to YHWH's people, and the plural language at the end of 7:17 ("our God") suggests that the speaker is either a group or a leader responding for a group. The style of 7:17 also suggests that these verses function as a transition from a prayer to the subsequent hymnic response of 7:18-20, since they speak about YHWH ("they shall turn in dread to YHWH, our God") and directly to YHWH ("they shall stand in fear of you [second masculine singular]"). This vacillation between

second and third person speech to/about YHWH is not uncommon in hymnic style.

The primary motif in 7:16-17—the fear of the nations in response to YHWH's aid of Judah—evokes allusions to the response of the nations when Israel enters into and conquers the land (e.g., Deut 28:10; 31:2-6; Josh 2:9, 24). The reference in the prophet's prayer in 7:15 to "the days of old" suggests that the passage has in mind the story of the entry into the land.

The actions described in this prayer depict a paralyzing fear on the part of the nations. They clap their hand over their mouths and bow to the ground; they stream from their fortresses because they recognize the power of YHWH. In short, the prayer teaches people to affirm YHWH's power because YHWH has power over the nations, and the nations will ultimately see this power when YHWH acts to aid YHWH's people.

The Past as Promise for the Present, 7:18-20

Micah 7:18-20 begins with a rhetorical question but changes from the dominant prayer style of 7:14-17 to a hymnic style, speaking about YHWH. The rhetorical question plays off the prophet

Micah's name. "Micah" means "Who is like YHWH?" while Micah 7:18 begins, "Who is a God like you?"

The rest of 7:18-20 functions as a hymn praising YHWH's compassion and forgiveness. In doing so, it completes a curious series of allusions to Joshua and to Torah traditions, on the one hand, and to Micah and Jonah on the other. The previous unit alluded to the entry into the land, and Micah 7:18-19 (for the third time in the Book of the Twelve, see Joel 2:13+3:20-21; Jonah 4:2) recalls Exodus 34:6-7, whose literary setting appears in the aftermath of the golden calf episode of the exodus story. Micah 7:20 refers to Jacob, then Abraham, as recipients of YHWH's renewed faithfulness and *hesed*. Thus, a series of allusions appears in reverse canonical order: conquest, golden calf, Jacob, and Abraham. The units containing the allusions are framed by the inclusio "days of old" (7:14, 20), and the combination of allusions covers the exodus and ancestral stories. Similar canon-conscious allusions appear toward the end of the Book of the Twelve (see Zech 13:7-9; Mal 4:4-6).³

These allusions in Micah 7:8-20 have implications on several levels: literary, chronological, and theological. Literarily, these allusions presuppose the combination of the ancestral and exodus stories, a combination that recent scholarship increasingly places in the exilic period at the earliest.⁴ Chronologically, the fact that Micah 7:8-20 presumes Micah 6:1-7:7 (which itself shows awareness of traditions from the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History) further suggests a reflective use of a developing canon, which included Kings, Joshua, Exodus, and Genesis for the final form of Micah 6-7. Theologically, the allusions are not merely artistic showpieces. They refer to the conquest as an act of wonder to bring Israel into the land; they refer to the grace shown to Israel after its punishment for worshiping the golden calf; they refer to YHWH's fidelity in keeping the promise given to Jacob (presumably the promise to be present with him, Gen 28:13-15 [see also 35:10-12]); and they refer to the *hesed* that YHWH showed to Abraham, *hesed* that undoubtedly assumes YHWH's keeping promises of progeny, land, and blessing to the nations in Genesis 12-25. These allusions function, though, as part of a prayer and promise to a new generation, one that found itself back in the land after it had been lost, one that saw that return as a sign of grace after its punishment for the worship of idols (Mic 1:2-9), and one

that needed reassurance that the blessings of promise would continue for its own well-being.

In addition, Micah 7:19b takes up Jonah 2:3a. Micah 7:19b (“You cast all their sins into the depths of the sea”) not only sounds similar to the language of Jonah 2:3a (“You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas”) but also disrupts the style of Micah 7:18-20 because it speaks about the people in third person plural (their sins) rather than in first person plural. This parallel was thus likely inserted into Micah when Jonah was added to the corpus of the Twelve. This editorial gloss not only comments on Micah 7:18-20 using the language of the thanksgiving hymn of Jonah but also demonstrates a similar interpretive tendency to the Jonah hymn (2:3-10). Namely, the language of Jonah in Micah 7:19b draws a parallel, hermeneutically, between Jonah and Israel, and it demonstrates an attitude of forgiveness that is compatible with Micah 7:18-20.

CONNECTIONS

Micah 7:8-20 represents a lengthy pause in the meta-narrative of the Book of the Twelve, not unlike how the book of Deuteronomy literarily anticipates the coming entry into the land and the entire history of the people. From the literary perspective of the eighth century, Micah 7:8-20 anticipates the fate of Zion and the people of Judah during the seventh century and beyond. It portrays the future as a time when destruction is delayed, but a time when Judah will experience a rapid series of oppressive occupations before it experiences redemption. [\[Judah in the Assyrian Period\]](#)

Lady Zion acknowledges the coming punishment as justified (7:9) but articulates her conviction that it will not be the end of the story. YHWH’s enigmatic response to her affirmation (7:11-13) offers both hope and threat. YHWH promises her both a reprieve (time to build her walls and extend her border) and judgment (desolation of the land because of its inhabitants). In between, the hinge verse (7:12) functions as both promise and threat. Read as a continuation of 7:11, Micah 7:12 anticipates a return of exiles from Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. It thus functions as a promise that God will restore Zion. However, read as the introduction to

Judah in the Assyrian Period

AO The Assyrian period saw many changes, but one constant was the political, economic, and religious influence of Assyria that rose in the region from the last third of the eighth century until the fall of Nineveh. By the time

Josiah took the throne as an adult (622), Assyrian power in the region was slipping, opening the door for Josiah's attempt to reestablish Davidic power in the country, raising hopes until Josiah was killed. Within a few short years, Babylon asserted its control of the region.

Date	Event
734	Syro-Ephraimite War Ends with Assyrian Incursion into the Levant
722	Overthrow of Samaria by Assyria; Israel Annexed as Assyrian Province
714	Ashdod Rebellion Solidifies Assyrian Control of Philistia
701	Siege of Jerusalem by Assyrian King (Sennacherib)
663	Assyria takes Thebes—Represents High-water Mark of Assyrian Conquest
622	Josiah Takes Throne—Initiates Religious and Political Reform
612	Babylon Defeats Assyria by Taking Nineveh
609	Egyptian Pharaoh Kills Josiah
605	Battle of Carchemish—Babylon defeats Egypt
597	1st Exile Following Jehoiachim's Rebellion
587	Destruction of Jerusalem and 2nd Exile

7:13, Micah 7:12 warns of the coming punishment as Lady Zion will be beset by armies from those same regions.

The people at the end of Micah are the subject of prophetic intercession (7:14-15a), which leads to YHWH's positive response (7:15b: "I will show him wondrous things."). There are good reasons, however, to understand this response as part of a long view of history. Lady Zion, that is to say, Jerusalem as the capital city, is given a reprieve at the end of Micah. Judgment is delayed, though not removed (7:11-13). The reprieve follows the prophetic lament of 7:1-7, which details the many problems of the land and its people, and the reprieve commences immediately after the affirmation of faith from Lady Zion herself (7:8-10), who speaks of the coming punishment of judgment from YHWH. Toward what end should a reader understand this delay? To understand its function in the Book of the Twelve, one must focus on the people's attitude in Micah 7:16-20.

The role of Micah in the Book of the Twelve involves documenting the sins of Judah in the eighth century, hearing the prophetic confrontation of those sins, and noting YHWH's response. In this sense, it is important to note what the book of Micah says and does not say about the people. While chapters 4-7 have been heavily shaped by concerns of the exilic and postexilic communities, the book itself asks to be heard in an eighth-century setting. This means the form of the book is not merely a history lesson. Rather, it is both a reminder of what has happened and a call to hopeful living for the current generation. Hence, the reprieve of Micah 7:14-20 presents itself as a liturgical response

from the prophet and the people, whose hope lies in YHWH's character as a God of compassion and forgiveness. Knowledgeable readers who hear the message of Micah 7 hear the warnings that the reprieve is not permanent. Those readers know Jerusalem will fall a little more than a century after it survives the siege of Sennacherib. Yet the message is not a message of pessimism but optimism. Despite the coming difficulties, YHWH's faithfulness and *hesed* toward the descendants of Abraham and Jacob will endure. That assurance of divine presence for the long term provides hope that all is not lost. YHWH's compassion toward YHWH's people who have sinned reaffirms that the relationship will endure beyond the destruction of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, YHWH compels the people to take up their covenant obligations. The society as described by the prophetic voice in Micah 6:1–7:7 hardly portrays behavior that reflects the will of YHWH. Yet once again YHWH's long-suffering faithfulness to the promises given the ancestors and the exodus generation prove the consistent character of YHWH as a God of grace and mercy.

For their part, the people in 7:16-20 respond gratefully, articulating YHWH's power as a sign to the nations and praising God, for they realize YHWH's protection is their only hope. They recall YHWH's salvific acts from the past as attestations to the character of their God. If the Book of the Twelve stopped with Micah, one might indeed call the Book of the Twelve a book with a Hollywood ending. But the story continues.

In the shift from Micah to Nahum, the character of Judah will experience reprieve as Assyrian hegemony comes to an end. Judah receives a message of the destruction of Assyria, a hated foe who oppressed Judah for over a century. Destruction of Assyria is received as good news for Judah (Nah 1:15–2:2). Yet when attention returns to the Judah's behavior in Habakkuk 1:2-4, the prophet complains that nothing has changed. When the book of Habakkuk begins, the literary setting presumes the Assyrians no longer dominate the region, but YHWH's people still live in a world of violence and injustice largely of their own making (Hab 1:2-4).

What significance does this message have for today's community of faith? If one deals with the Old Testament merely as an interpretation of history, then probably very little. If, however, one approaches the biblical text as the church's faith book, then this

passage has much to offer by way of analogy. The world stands continually at crossroads: between war and peace, between economic chaos and health, between abusing our environment or cleaning it up. The choices made by one generation affect the lives of future generations—for good or ill. Texts like Micah 7:8-20 offer both warning and hope for communities of faith. They speak of God's care as a word of hope. As God has been with us in the past, God will be present in the future. But the presence of God is only one side of the story. God's compassion is not a license to behave as though we have a "get out of jail free" card that is eternally valid. Choices have consequences.

The ancient reader of Micah 7:8-20 presumably knew the story of Judah's distant past and knew that previous generations had rejected the path that would have pleased its God. Reflection on the past offers a vantage point from which clarity may arise. A Persian-period reader had a clearer perspective than an eighth-century reader concerning the long-term implications of the community's behavior. Such clarity, however, is not always present in the moment of choice. If one reads this text sympathetically from an eighth-century perspective, one sees a people in need of help petitioning their God. God's affirmation plays a pivotal role in offering hope that God has not abandoned the people, that punishment can be staved off, and that something can change if the community has more time. The existence of a future with God is comforting. Yet we (like readers of the past) often put on blinders by focusing on short-term difficulties rather than long-term solutions. We rationalize selfish and convenient actions instead of acting to benefit the world at large for generations to come. Fear and the fear of change make us dig in our heels.

The form of this passage also confronts readers (ancient and modern) with the need to make choices that have national consequences. Assyria's arrival in Judah as a military power did not surprise many people in the eighth century. Anyone with an eye on the political realm could see Assyria positioning itself to become a player on the world stage. Economically, in our time people know that the social net for the elderly in this country is in serious danger of collapse. Yet because the problems are thirty years away, as a nation we are slow to hear the calls to solve the problem. Seen as a looming crisis, the problems appear daunting but not pressing. Seen from the perspective of later generations, our failure to

respond may well be viewed as shortsighted and selfish. In Micah 7:8-20, YHWH responds to the pleas of Lady Zion and the people with a reprieve of immediate judgment but warns that the underlying cause of the judgment has not changed. Every generation must decide anew how it will respond to its own societal obligations. People of faith are not immune from political choices and their consequences.

NOTES

1. James D. Nogalski, "Micah 7:8-20: Re-evaluating the Identity of the Enemy," in *The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation: Hearing the Word of God through Historically Dissimilar Traditions* (ed. Randall Heskett and Brian Irwin; The Library of Hebrew Bible/OTS 469; New York: T & T Clark, 2010) 125–42.

2. Ibid.

3. For discussion of the allusions, see James D. Nogalski, "Intertextuality and the Twelve," *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts* (ed. James W. Watts and Paul House; JSOTSup 102–24; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996) 123–24.

4. A significant number of European and American scholars have been reassessing the dates of the tradition blocks of the Pentateuch since the 1960s. See the review of recent literature on dating these Pentateuchal materials and their combinations in Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Bible 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010) 4–16.

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NAHUM

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Dating the Prophet, the Source Material, and the Book

Nahum offers an illustrative case study in how difficult it can be to date prophets and prophetic literature. Increasingly, especially among redaction historical studies, the composite nature of Nahum has come to be recognized. As a result, it has become difficult to speak with certainty concerning biographical details about the prophet. Apart from the name of the prophet and his hometown mentioned in the superscription (1:1), the text provides no other explicit biographical detail. [Nahum in Jewish Tradition] The writing also contains no prophetic narrative on which to hang a reconstruction of the prophet's life. There is still, however, general agreement that Nahum was an actual prophet. Nevertheless, consensus no longer reigns that all three of the major poetic pieces of Nahum come from the same period, much less the same prophetic figure (see discussion in "Literary Form, Structure, and Unity" below).

A bit more can be said about dating the writing named for Nahum, though the composite nature of the material suggests a diachronic process resulting in at

Nahum in Jewish Tradition



Nahum is not a prominent figure in rabbinic tradition. Most of the ancient extra biblical references to Nahum simply indicate that the prophet lived during the reign of Manasseh, though a few place him about a century earlier in the reign of Jotham.

Elsewhere, the motif of Nineveh's repentance, along with speculation about its failure, brings together the message of Jonah and Nahum. One rabbinic text, for example, states, "Previously Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher, prophesied against her and she repented of her sins; and when they sinned again, there prophesied once more against her Nahum of Beth Koshi, as is recorded in this book" (*targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Nah 1:1).

These and other passages discuss why and how Nineveh repented in Jonah but is condemned in Nahum, thus connecting the two books. They generally conclude that Nineveh's repentance was short lived and that Jonah's prophecy of doom was proved genuine. B. Ego cites several other examples of this tendency to harmonize the message of Jonah and Nahum together, while others treat the repentance as superficial.

See the discussion of Jonah in rabbinic tradition in this commentary and the essay by Beate Ego, "The Repentance of Nineveh in the Story of Jonah and Nahum's Prophecy of the City's Destruction—A Coherent Reading of the Twelve as Reflected in the Aggadah," in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. Paul L. Redditt and Aaron Scharf; BZAW 325; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003) 155–64.

English translation from Kevin J. Cathcart and Robert P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets* (The Aramaic Bible 14; Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 131.

Assyrian Empire

The eighth century BCE saw a dramatic rise in the territory controlled by the Assyrian empire, making it the dominant superpower of the region. By 663, with the capture of Thebes in Egypt, Assyria controlled territories and trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the Nile River.



least two phases of the book's growth. By most accounts, the bulk of Nahum 2–3 represents the earlier corpus. This early corpus collected and arranged anti-Assyria sayings into two parallel poetic depictions of the fall of Nineveh. These parallel depictions also likely included a superscription (1:1a) and a thematic frame (an introduction and a conclusion) that taunted the failure of Assyria's numerical superiority (1:11–12; 3:16–17) and celebrated the imminent death of Assyria's king (1:14; 3:18–19). This collection celebrated the downfall

of Assyria, the hated overlord who forced Judah to pay exorbitant tribute to the Assyrian coffers for most of the seventh century. Consequently, this collection was likely compiled around the time of Nineveh's destruction in 612 BCE.

The character of this anti-Assyria collection changes rather dramatically in the second phase of the editorial process. This second stage added the theophanic hymn (1:2–8) to the front of the book, along with editorial transitions (1:1b, 9–15*) that wove the newer materials into the preexisting introduction.¹ The theophanic hymn accentuates the theological orientation of Nahum by emphasizing the invincibility of YHWH against his enemies. Prior to the inclusion of the theophanic hymn and its transition, the early core of Nahum material only mentions YHWH peripherally (1:14; 2:13 [MT 2:14]; 3:5), but the theophany and the editorial transition claim YHWH is the source of punishment for Assyria. Including the theophanic hymn emphasizes YHWH's punishment of the wicked. The same emphasis appears again in the theophanic hymn of Habakkuk (see discussion of Nahum in the Book of the Twelve below).

In terms of dating this second phase of the book, no absolute consensus has been found. Increasingly, however, redactional studies have suggested that the independent theophanic hymn

(which is also in the form of a partial acrostic) likely stems from a postexilic setting. The question as to when this theophany was added to the earlier core of Nahum relates closely to how one accounts for the deviations within the acrostic's pattern (see the discussion below in "Literary Form, Structure, and Unity"). This author concludes that the incorporation of the theophanic hymn and the changes to its acrostic character more likely occurred simultaneously than in two separate stages. The changes to the acrostic in the theophanic hymn almost certainly indicate an awareness of a context that includes Micah 7 and Joel. [Nahum 1:3 and Exodus 34:6-7]

Nahum 1:3 and Exodus 34:6-7



Nah 1:3a contains an expansion to the acrostic poem that draws on Exod 34:6-7 applied contextually to Assyria. See [Nahum 1:3 and Exodus 34:6-7] in the commentary to Nah 1:2-3. See discussion of Nah 1:2-8. The expansions to the acrostic poem imply Joel 1–2 because, along with Mic 7:18-20, they allude to Exod 34:6-7 (and Joel 2:12-14; 4:19-20) and to the same combination of locusts as Joel 1:4; 2:25 in Nah 3:15-17.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity

The form, structure, and unity of Nahum are complex issues. The book exhibits a clear structure, but the structural integrity of the book comes from the combination of several originally independent poems joined together in more than one stage—as noted in the previous section. The final form of Nahum makes two important claims: (1) God punishes the wicked, and (2) the mighty power of Assyria will be taken down. These two claims largely reflect the particular emphases of the two compositional stages of Nahum.

The early corpus likely arose in the aftermath of Assyria's destruction (see [Nahum's Early Structure] in Nah 1:9). Its character derives from the assembling of a series of short sayings celebrating or anticipating Assyria's imminent downfall, sometime after 612 BCE. The core of the early corpus contained two collections that rehearse Nineveh's destruction (2:3-13 [MT 2:4-14]; 3:1-19). The first of these collections anticipates the downfall of Assyria by combining a succession of descriptive poems that move through various stages of the attack (2:1-10): preparing defenses, describing the movement of the attacking army, the downfall of the city, and the aftermath of the destruction. This first section then concludes with a taunt of Nineveh's power (2:11-13).

The second half of Nahum's early corpus, 3:1-19*, contains a composite collection that includes a sarcastic woe oracle and divine response (3:1-7), followed by two taunt songs that allude to

Nineveh's destruction from several perspectives (3:8-11, 12-17). As in Nahum 2, the general progression of the units within this chapter increases the threat against Nineveh. At the beginning of the chapter, military and sexual imagery implies an attack against Lady Nineveh in which she is humiliated. By the end of the chapter, her leaders have fled and the king is dying.

The end of chapter 3 contains thematic parallels to the beginning of the early corpus in that it portrays Assyria's mistaken dependence on its numerical strength as an illusion of power (1:12; 3:15-17) followed by taunts aimed directly at the *dying king* of Assyria (1:14; 3:18-19). This dual-themed frame shows the same progression of imagery as the intervening material. Specifically, the first portion of this frame (1:14) threatens Nineveh and its king with what chapters 2-3 describe as occurring, while the second portion of the frame (3:18-19) assumes that the events described in chapters 2-3 have come to pass.

In the end, the expanded corpus changes the tenor of the collection by incorporating a theophanic hymn that stresses YHWH's judgment against the wicked (1:2-8) and by editing a transition (1:9-15*) into the anti-Nineveh sayings. In doing so, the expanded material alludes to other portions of the Book of the Twelve and Isaiah as well, thus putting Nineveh's punishment into a broader context theologically and literarily (see Nahum and the Book of the Twelve in the next section of this introduction). Whereas the early corpus addressed Lady Nineveh and her king (see discussion of 1:9-2:2), the expanded corpus addresses Judah and explicitly connects the downfall of Assyria with the actions of YHWH (see especially the discussion of Nah 1:15 and Isa 52:7). Granted, scholars will undoubtedly continue to debate when the theophany entered into Nahum. Yet given these connections to Joel and Deutero-Isaiah—connections that appear in the expansions to the acrostic (see 1:2b-3a), the editorial transition (see discussion of Nah 1:15), and in the expansions to the original frame (see discussion of Nah 3:15-17)—it makes more sense to say that these allusions were added along with the other expansions in order to situate Nahum in the growing Book of the Twelve rather than to argue for a third stage of editorial activity. In short, the structural unity of Nahum, along with its dual thematic emphases, derives from the position and function of Nahum within the Book of the Twelve.

Nahum in the Book of the Twelve

Within the Book of the Twelve, Nahum plays a theological and historical role. There is wide agreement among scholars studying the formation of the Twelve that Micah was followed by Zephaniah in an early collection of four writings that were edited together (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah).² Nahum and Habakkuk were then inserted between Micah and Zephaniah, likely for two reasons. First, the existing transition of Micah to Zephaniah created a long span of time from the last king mentioned in Micah (Hezekiah) and the king (Josiah) whose reign serves as the literary setting for Zephaniah.

[Hezekiah to Josiah] Second, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah focus so much on the fate of Israel and Judah that this corpus fails to provide an adequate explanation for the Assyrian and Babylonian occupations of Judah in the seventh century. Nahum addresses the former occupation and Habakkuk the latter.

The theophany of Nahum 1 plays a major theological role in the development of Micah–Habakkuk. In Micah 7:8–20, Lady Zion reproaches Lady Nineveh for taunting her, and Lady Zion receives a reprieve from YHWH's judgment. The theophany in Nahum 1:2–8 has one key message: YHWH will punish the wicked. The likelihood is that this hymn was woven onto the front of a collection of material that celebrates the downfall of Nineveh and the impending death of the king of Assyria to create an emphatic depiction of the fulfillment of the promise in Micah 7:8–10, 11–13. In its current position as the introductory passage of Nahum, the hymn makes it clear that God will take down Nineveh/Assyria after God has used them to punish Judah and Jerusalem.

Redactional texts in Nahum indicate awareness of other texts in the Book of the Twelve. These include the adaptation of Nahum 1:2–8 and 3:15–16. Micah 1:2–4 begins the previous writing with a theophanic portrayal of God's arrival for the punishment of Samaria and Judah (Mic 1:5–7). This form may have influenced the selection of a theophanic hymn for the beginning of Nahum,

Hezekiah to Josiah



Between the death of Hezekiah (725–696) and the beginning of the reign of Josiah (640–609), one not only finds a gap of fifty-seven years, but this gap is evaluated extremely negatively in 2 Kgs 21, where Manasseh's fifty-five-year reign and the short two-year reign of his son Amon are categorically classified as times of syncretistic practices and roundly condemned. Left unstated in Kings, though, is the fact that Assyria became the de facto overlord of Judah during this period. Only with the fall of Assyria in 612 to Babylon does Assyria cease to be a force in the region, though its influence was already waning by the time the "Book of the Law" was found in 622, an event that caused or resulted from Josiah's reforms (see 2 Kgs 22–23). This fifty-seven-year gap, as well as the fall of Assyria and the rise of Babylon, are the subject of Nahum and Habakkuk respectively. Likely, Nahum and Habakkuk were edited at the same time to fill the gap between Micah and Zephaniah historically and theologically. See the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary.

See the discussion in J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (2d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 363–74, 392–93.

though Nahum 1:2-8 represents a longer, independent example of a theophany used as a theological affirmation of YHWH's power.

In addition, the acrostic poem of Nahum 1:2-8 shows signs of expansion, the largest of which (1: 2b-3a) clearly evokes Exodus 34:7—the fourth time a writing evokes Exodus 34:6-7 in the Book of the Twelve (Joel 2:12-13; 3:18-19; Jonah 4:2; Mic 7:18-20). The allusion to Exodus 34:7 in the expansion of the acrostic (1:2b-3a) pairs with the allusion to Exodus 34:6 in Micah 7:18. This combined citation of Exodus 34:6 and 34:7 recognizes that YHWH's ongoing compassion for God's people leaves hope for a renewed relationship with YHWH on the one hand, even in the midst of punishment, but also presumes that YHWH holds Assyria accountable for overstepping what YHWH intended Assyria to do (not unlike the message of Isa 10).

Partial Verses



The MT contains marks, provided by the Masoretes, that signify the logical half point of nearly every verse in the Old Testament. Hence, scholars refer to these halves as the “a” and “b” portion of the verse. Many, though not all, verses also contain different marks that subdivide these halves into two or three additional part. Scholars tend to refer to these subsections using Greek letters (alpha, beta, gamma, etc.). In this instance, 3:16^a refers to the third part of the first half of 3:16.

Redactional glosses in Nahum 3:15^a, 16^b provide an interpretive move and implicitly equate Assyria with one of the locusts mentioned in Joel. [Partial Verses] More concretely, the addition of the word “*yeleq*” (hopping locust) interprets Assyria's destroyer (Babylon) as a locust who devours Assyria and moves on to its next prey. This model and sequence is precisely what one finds in Joel 1:4, except Joel tells of the “locust” attacks from the perspective of Judah, not Assyria.

The Message of Nahum

The message of Nahum has been edited to fit in its current location within the Book of the Twelve to interpret the rise and fall of Assyria as the work of YHWH. Nahum announces the end of Assyrian hegemony as anticipated in Micah, the previous writing. At first, Assyria's downfall is treated as good news for Judah (1:15), but problems loom on the horizon. The message of 3:15-17 demonstrates that Assyria is overthrown by a nation more powerful than itself, a nation that can only be interpreted as Babylon, though it is not so named in Nahum. These verses also imply that Babylon will not be satisfied to destroy Assyria but will continue its own move westward to conquer new territories. This theme, the impending arrival of the Babylonians as a continuation of God's

punishment against Judah, plays a central role in the next writing of the Book of the Twelve—Habakkuk.

In this respect, one can see a close connection between the themes of Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. The judgment anticipated in Micah is accomplished when YHWH uses Assyria to punish Judah in much the same way Isaiah 10:5 portrays Assyria as the rod of YHWH's anger. YHWH uses Assyria for this purpose, even though YHWH knows Assyria intends to do more harm than YHWH will allow (Isa 10:12-19). Moving from Micah to Nahum allows the reader of the Twelve to interpret the lengthy period of Assyrian hegemony as punishment from YHWH, but not one that gives Assyria unlimited power over Judah. In Nahum, the Assyrian invasion gives way to the overthrow of the Assyrians. Nahum interprets the changing political power in the seventh century as the work of YHWH. The rejoicing of Judah, however, does not last long in the Book of the Twelve because YHWH's people have not changed. Indeed, the charges that open Habakkuk are essentially the same ones described in Micah 6–7. As a result, Habakkuk announces that the “locust” that destroyed Nineveh will soon punish Judah. This movement from Micah to Nahum to Habakkuk implies an extended period of punishment for Judah—one that ultimately leads to the destruction of Jerusalem. This portrait of protracted punishment comes close to the notion one finds in the prayer of Ezra in Nehemiah 9:32: “Now therefore, our God—the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant in steadfast love—do not treat lightly all the hardship that is come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors and all your people *since the time of the kings of Assyria until today.*”

NOTES

1. The “*” symbol indicates that the passage contains material from more than one layer of editorial activity. See discussion of this passage in the commentary for the evidence concerning which portions were added. I assume here the arguments that later material best accounts for 1:9-10, 12b; 2:1-3. See James D. Nogalski, “The Redactional Shaping of Nahum 1 for the Book of the Twelve,” in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (ed. Philip R. Davies and David J.A. Clines; JSOTSup 144; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 193–202.

2. For discussions of this Book of Four, see [Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah] in Mic 7.

OUTLINE OF NAHUM

- I. Nahum 1:1-2:2: Cosmic Justice and Nineveh's Fate
 - A. 1:1, 2-8: Superscription and Theophany Report of YHWH's Wrath
 - B. 1:9-2:2: Editorial Transition to Anti-Assyria Materials
- II. Nahum 2:3-3:19: Taunting a Fallen Superpower
 - A. 2:3-13 (MT 2:4-14): Battle Scene and Reflection
 - B. 3:1-19: A Second Taunt
 - 1. 3:1-7: Woe Oracle and Divine Response
 - 2. 3:8-11: Nineveh Will Fall Like Thebes
 - 3. 3:12-17: Taunting Nineveh
 - 4. 3:18-19: Impending Death of the King

COSMIC JUSTICE AND NINEVEH'S FATE

Nahum 1:1–2:2

COMMENTARY

Three blocks of preexisting material form the core of Nahum as we now have it: an edited, semi-acrostic, theophanic hymn extolling YHWH's wrath against the wicked (1:2-8); and two celebrations of Nineveh's destruction (2:3-13 [MT 2:4-14]; 3:1-15). The remaining material (1:9–2:2; 3:16-19) represents composite units that constitute a frame around the two destruction texts—a frame that was later expanded when the theophany was added. More will be said about this frame in the discussion of 1:9–2:2 below, following a discussion of the theophany.

Superscription and Theophany Report of YHWH's Wrath, 1:1, 2-8

The first section of Nahum contains two units: a two-part superscription (1:1) and a semi-acrostic theophany (1:2-8). The superscription of Nahum, in actuality, contains two titles, either of which alone could introduce the book. The first half of the verse describes the content (“an oracle concerning Nineveh”), while the second half of the verse introduces the name of the prophetic figure associated with the material that follows (“the book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh”). Since the early portions of 1:9–2:2* (see below) address Lady Nineveh as a personified city, it makes sense that the first portion of 1:1 originally introduced the early version of the book. Consequently, the explicit reference to Nineveh in 1:1 formed the antecedent to the feminine singular pronouns utilized of the addressee in 1:11. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria from the time of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), who rebuilt and enlarged it near the beginning of his reign as his primary residence (see discussion of

Nineveh in Jonah 1:1). It remained the capital of the Assyrian empire until its downfall in 612 BCE.

No traditions concerning the prophet Nahum appear in biblical texts, and the place “Elkosh” cannot be reliably located, though several places throughout the ancient Near East have claimed the prophet as their own. (See [Nahum in Jewish Tradition] in the introduc-

The Prophet Nahum as a Scribal Creation

AO Occasionally, scholars have suggested that the name Nahum, which means “compassion,” could be a pseudonym that alludes to 3:7, where Assyria is shown no sympathy. It is also noted that the unidentified town, Elkosh, could even be a play on words to the first word of the theophany, God (’el), and the word for “stubble” (*qas̄*) in 1:10. Thus, Elkosh is created from ’el *qas̄* (God stubble). As creative as these suggestions might be, they have not won many followers.

For further reading, see Herman Schulz, *Das Buch Nahum. Eine redaktionskritische Untersuchung* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 129; Berlin: DeGruyter, 1973) 106–107; Alfred Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum* (UUA 1946/7; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1947) 148; and Oswald T. Allis, “Nahum, Niniveh, Elkosh,” *EvQ* 27 (1955): 76–77.

tion). This paucity of data has been used unsuccessfully to suggest that the prophet’s name and the town derive from scribal allusions to the book’s content rather than an actual person. [The Prophet Nahum as a Scribal Creation]

The semi-acrostic nature of the poem in 1:2–8 suggests it derives from an independent origin, but the current location of this theophany suggests its placement is deliberate and reflective for the book. [Semi-acrostic Theophany] This theophanic hymn at the beginning of Nahum comports well with the theophany report that begins Micah (1:2–4) and with an extended theophanic hymn that concludes Habakkuk 3. Recent investigations suggest that the theophanic hymns of

Nahum and Habakkuk were incorporated into their respective writings at the same time, thus evincing a deliberate editorial deci-

sion by those working on the developing corpus that becomes the Book of the Twelve.¹ Both hymns, in their contexts, use theophanic language to anticipate a day of divine intervention (see Nah 1:7; Hab 3:16) in which YHWH unleashes his wrath and fury against unnamed foes—enemies whose identities can hardly be interpreted as anyone other than Assyria and Babylon, respectively. The placement of these two hymns in the Book of the Twelve, then, forms a literary bracket around depictions of the Assyrian and Babylonian periods. Moreover, this bracket

Semi-acrostic Theophany



“Theophany” derives from the Greek words for “God” (*theos*) and “appearance” (*phaneia*). In prophetic literature, theophanies take the form of reports of YHWH’s appearance for judgment. Several of these theophanic reports appear in the Book of the Twelve, and the object of YHWH’s judgment must be determined from the context (Mic 1:2–5; Nah 1:2–8; Hab 3:3–15). The form of this particular theophany, however, becomes more artistic than ecstatic when one realizes that each line of the original poem in 1:2–8 began with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. A few dissenters notwithstanding, most scholars since the late nineteenth century have recognized this acrostic pattern as the structuring device used by the author. Other poems in the Hebrew Bible demonstrate awareness of this technique (notably, Ps 119; Lam 1, 2, 3, 4). However, since the acrostic pattern of Nah 1:2–8 only goes halfway through the alphabet yet exhibits a complete rhetorical message, then two possibilities could account for the semi-acrostic poem. Either this poem originally contained poetic lines covering exactly half the alphabet, or the editor who selected the poem only needed the first half to make the rhetorical point.

affirms that YHWH will control the rise and fall of the super-powers to punish Judah.

The theophanic hymn (1:2-8) has its own train of thought in addition to the acrostic structural elements. The logic of the hymn unfolds in three sections (1:2-3, 4-5, 6-8). Nahum 1:2-3 introduces the theme of YHWH's appearance for vengeance on his enemies. Nahum 1:4-5 describes the effects of YHWH's appearance on nature. Nahum 1:6-8 forces the reader/hearer to confront the implications of YHWH's wrath for themselves, either as a warning to YHWH's enemies (1:6, 8) or as comfort for those seeking refuge in YHWH (1:7).

Nahum 1:2-3. Nahum 1:2a represents the first (*ʾaleph*) line of the acrostic that introduces the theme of God's vengeance. The second (*bêt*) line of the acrostic, however, does not come until 1:3b, which then depicts YHWH's arrival in the whirlwind. In between the first two acrostic lines (1:2b-3a), one finds an adapted quote of Exodus 34:6-7. [Nahum 1:2b-3a and Exodus 34:6-7] Nahum 1:2-3 places a heavy emphasis on YHWH's wrath, power, and vengeance. A series of statements, including the elicitation of Exodus 34:6-7, describes the character of YHWH with one of these elements. The final statement of Nahum 1:3 announces the arrival of YHWH in the whirlwind. The sense of impending judgment is strong as a result of this descriptive language followed by the announcement of YHWH's appearance.

Nahum 1:4-5. Nahum 1:4-5 describe the effects of YHWH's arrival on nature by depicting the drying up of the sea, the withering of the country's fertile places, the fear of the mountains and hills, and

Nahum 1:2b-3a and Exodus 34:6-7



For the fifth time in the Book of the Twelve, one encounters an allusion to Exod 34:6-7 (see the discussions of Joel 2:13-14; 3:19-20; Jonah 4:2; and Mic 7:18-20). Exod 34:6-7 were well-known verses as they are cited elsewhere in the canon (Num 14:18; Deut 7:9-10; Ps 86:15; and Neh 9:17, 31). Nevertheless, their heavy concentration in the Book of the Twelve shows deliberate signs of redactional awareness.

Nahum's use of Exod 34:6-7 reflects a redactional insertion, indicated by the expansion between the two lines of the acrostic. It also differs from Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 4:2; and Mic 7:18-20 in that it focuses on YHWH's vengeance rather than YHWH's compassion. Even this variation, however, fits the function of Nahum *within* the Book of the Twelve. The Joel 2 and Micah citation texts focus on YHWH's compassion for Judah and its remnant. The Jonah citation text explores the implications of Exod 34:6-7 for YHWH's compassion toward the nations. All three of these texts share a focus on YHWH's compassion and long-suffering. By contrast, the Joel 3:19-20 allusion and Nah 1:2b-3a draw on the flip side of Exod 34:6-7—YHWH's judgment against the guilty. In the case of Nah 1, the guilty one against whom YHWH acts is Assyria. This pronouncement is set against the larger story of Assyria's domination of the region for the better part of a century and its domination of Judah itself from the end of the eighth century until the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE. Likely, Assyrian control of Judah began to wane in the two decades prior to Nineveh's destruction. By the time of Josiah's reforms, parts of the reform (at least as described in 2 Kgs 23) seem clearly designed to eliminate Assyrian cult symbols in Jerusalem. This would hardly have been possible if Assyria were still in full control of the region. Thus, the genre and the adapted quote in Nah 1:2b-3a both function similarly to explain Assyria's downfall as the work of YHWH. Jonah 4:2 thus uses Exod 34:6-7 to justify Nineveh's deliverance while Nah 1:2b-3a uses the same passage to pronounce Nineveh's judgment.

See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Scribal Wisdom and Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve," in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (ed. Leo G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 31–49.

Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon



These place names appear in Hos 14, Amos 4, Mic 7, Hab 2, and Zech 10–11, where they suggest that something was lacking with the loss of Lebanon (Hos 14:5–7; Hab 2:17; and Zech 10:10; 11:1), Bashan (Amos 4:1; Mic 7:14; Zech 11:2), and Carmel (Amos 1:2; 9:3; Mic 7:14). Lebanon serves as a metaphor for the hope of a fertile land (Hos 14:5–7) and for a land destroyed (Hab 2:17). The “top of Carmel” symbolizes the place where YHWH’s devastation becomes manifest in Amos (1:2; 9:3). In Mic 7:14, Bashan, with Gilead, symbolizes lost trans-Jordanian territory and a desire for its return. The final mention of Bashan and Carmel in Zech 11:1–2 once again uses these places to symbolize the devastation about to confront the northern territory.



The Kadisha Valley, viewed from Dimane, Bsharri, Lebanon.

(Credit: Xtcridr, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:2006_Kadisha_Valley.JPG)

the heaving of the earth. Nahum 1:4 depicts YHWH’s actions as affecting Lebanon, Carmel, and Bashan. All three of these places connote areas of fertility in the northern kingdom, as well as regions that Israel felt to be part of its ideal kingdom borders (see also Isa 33:9; Jer 50:19; Mic 7:14).²

[Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon] This background helps one see why Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon are mentioned in Nahum 1:4. Reference to these areas as devastated because of YHWH’s appearance anticipates the loss of territory and trade partners that, in turn, has long-lasting political and economic implications.³

Nahum 1:5 concludes the description of nature’s reaction to YHWH’s arrival with portrayals of creation’s upheaval. This imagery is often compared to an earthquake with the

heaving of all that is stable. The use of these cosmic and regional terms in the theophany thus conveys a sense of imminent danger to the status of the world.

Nahum 1:6–8. Nahum 1:6–8 engages the reader to consider one’s own response to the appearance of YHWH. After laying out the effects of YHWH’s arrival on creation in 1:4–5, Nahum 1:6 begins with two rhetorical questions designed to instill a sense of fear in the audience by forcing one to ponder these images. Nahum 1:6 asks, who can withstand the anger/wrath of YHWH? This is not a question whose answer is open to doubt. Immediately, the reader intuitively answers: no one can endure this immense power. The same theme recurs near the end of the Book of the Twelve (see Mal 3:2).

After the culmination of YHWH’s destructive power against his enemies in 1:6, Nahum 1:7 abruptly moves to comfort those who seek refuge in YHWH, those who will find that YHWH offers strength and protection. The theophanic hymn then rearticulates its main theme in the concluding portion of the hymn in 1:8:

YHWH will make a quick end of his adversaries. This section thus juxtaposes two fates: those who take refuge in YHWH and those who oppose YHWH. The next unit begins to focus on the explicit implications of this wrath for Nineveh and its king.

Editorial Transition to Anti-Assyria Materials, 1:9–2:2 (MT 1:9–2:3)

Nahum 1:9–2:2 (MT 1:9–2:3), in its canonical form, contains two kinds of material: remnants of an introduction to the early Nahum corpus (1:11-12a, 14) and a redactional composition connecting the theophanic hymn to the older writing (1:9-10, 12b-13; 1:15 [MT 2:1]). [Nahum's Early Structure] The numerous changes in addressee in these verses are readily apparent in Hebrew, but they make the action difficult to follow. However, the preexisting frame becomes relatively easy to isolate because the transitional material shares common characteristics (allusions to Isaiah and a focus on the fate of Zion) and because the preexisting material introduces two themes that recur at the end of Nahum (3:16-17, 18-19). These two motifs (the uselessness of Assyria's strength and the death of its king) framed two taunt songs celebrating the destruction of Nineveh. The simplicity of this early structure is complicated considerably by the transitional introduction. Instead of addressing Lady Nineveh and the king of Assyria, the transitional material includes plural references to the people (1:9), feminine singular promises addressed to Lady Zion (1:12b-13; 1:15), and another masculine singular character—the herald bringing good news (1:15). The verses in this unit will be discussed in light of this dual focus (Assyria's impotency and its king's death) but will be treated within the context of the subunits in which they appear (1:9-10, 11-12, 13-14; 1:15–2:2).

Nahum 1:9-10. With 1:9, a new rhetorical unit addresses a group (2mp), and 1:9-10 reflects a series of statements implying that their devastation lies just around the corner. The new unit, however, assumes the presence of 1:2-8. Specifically, the plural verb at the beginning of 1:9 assumes the “enemies” spoken about in the last verse of the hymn (1:8) as the antecedent. The poetic metaphors in

Nahum's Early Structure



The early version of Nahum exhibited a parallel structure.

Frame Motif 1: Assyria's numerical strength will prove useless (1:11-12a)

Frame Motif 2: Impending death of the king (1:14)

Nineveh Taunt 1 (2:3-13 [MT 2:2-14])

Nineveh Taunt 2 (3:1-15)

Frame Motif 1: Assyria's numerical strength will prove useless (3:16-17)

Frame Motif 2: Impending death of the king (3:18-19)

Lady Nineveh

AO A significant body of data from ancient sources suggests that for a long time capital cities were personified as female entities. When introduced fully, these characters are given the title *bat* (daughter, Lady) plus the name of the region/city (*bat Zion*, *bat Babylon*, etc), but the title *bat* need not be specified for this character to appear. Most frequently, one finds this personification of Lady Zion in biblical texts in two contexts, though the two are not mutually exclusive: (1) when the fate of the city receives special attention and (2) when the intimate relationship between YHWH as husband and Lady Zion as wife and mother comes into focus. This personification is quite pronounced in Lamentations and in several prophetic passages (such as Isa 60–62; Ezek 23; Jer 2:2, 17–19; Mic 7:8–10; Zeph 3:14–20; Zech 2:3–11; 9:9–10). That foreign cities are also given this title is clear from other texts (such as Lady Egypt in Jer 46:11, 19; or Lady Babylon in Jer 50:42; 51:33).

1:9–10 depict an enemy who is ensnared in thorny briars and consumed (like liquor) until nothing remains. This enemy group, derived from the context, must refer to the Assyrians, though this has only been specified to this point by the reference to Nineveh in the superscription of Nahum 1:1a. The compounding of images in rapid succession gives the impression that Assyria's downfall is imminent.

Nahum 1:11–12. Nahum 1:11–12 forms a rhetorical unit that warns Nineveh of the aggressive actions of her king. This new unit abruptly changes the character being addressed from a group to a feminine singular entity that can only be interpreted as Nineveh personified. **[Lady Nineveh]** The “one going out” from her refers to the king of Assyria and depicts an aggressive march by an unnamed Assyrian

monarch. Poetically, this unnamed Assyrian king serves well the function of Nahum in the Book of the Twelve. Nahum explains the Assyrian era as a lengthy period of political domination whose beginning and end were controlled by YHWH.

Nahum 1:12 has long been noted as a verse whose Hebrew is quite difficult to follow. **[Interpreting Nahum 1:12]** On the one hand, it has an introductory messenger formula, so it could start a new unit. Every phrase, however, relies on pronouns that assume contextual antecedents, which means that the messenger formula cannot introduce an independent unit. Four times the verse presumes the identity of a character from its context. These changes will be clarified after noting the confusing syntax.

After the messenger formula, the syntax proves another source of confusion. The enigmatic phrases become more cumbersome because the conditional sentence contains multiple conditions and multiple consequences. As it appears, the syntactical markers indicate three conditions followed by three consequences, though few of the standard English translations render them as such. Nevertheless, this triple condition provides the most likely meaning of the parallel expressions *ʾim* . . . *wēkēn* . . . *wēkēn* (though . . . and though . . . and though) followed by two *vavs* on perfect verbs (then he will pass over and I will humble you) and an unconnected verbal clause (I will not humble you).

Interpreting Nahum 1:12

Ω The Hebrew of 1:12 is notoriously difficult, but English translations mask these difficulties. Literally, 1:12a and 1:12b read as follows:

1:12a: Though (*ʾim*) intact (plural) and thus (*věkēn*) many (plural), and thus (*věkēn*) they will be cut off (plural) and he will pass away (masculine singular).

1:12b: And (so) I will oppress you (feminine singular). I will not oppress you (feminine singular) any longer.

Most English translations assume that 1:12b continues the conditional syntax of the previous clauses (hence, NRSV has “*Though* I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more.”) However, this syntactical construction ignores the fact that the subject of 1:12b changes to a first person verb, making it difficult to see how this line continues the conditional construction of 1:12a, which is indicated by the combination of *ʾim*. . . *věkēn*. . . *věkēn* and uses third person verbs. Further, the final clause lacks the necessary conjunction that would continue this syntax.

Two additional options allow one to make sense of Nah 1:12 without resorting to consonantal emendation. One option would be to translate the last two verbs as a play on words (paronomasia) to portray complete rejection: “And I will humble you. I will not answer you again.” Both verbs could then come from *ʾānāh* (*ʾnh* III and *ʾnh* I respectively). Problematic for this reading is the verb

stem. It requires that the second form (a *pi`el* imperfect form of *ʾnh* I) means “respond,” though *ʾnh* I is not otherwise attested in *pi`el*. In response, the vowels could be changed to be a *qal* imperfect form without consonantal change and this could mean “respond.” Following this option would mean that the wordplay of 1:12b would simply accentuate YHWH’s rejection of Nineveh.

A second option would interpret the two verbs identically, but would interpret the antecedent of the 2fs suffixes as referring to different entities (Lady Nineveh and Lady Zion respectively): “And (so) I will oppress you (Lady Nineveh). I will not oppress you any longer (Lady Zion).” In this interpretation, YHWH would promise to humble Nineveh and to cease humbling Zion. The problem with this interpretation is, of course, that Lady Zion has not appeared in Nahum to this point. Nevertheless, she does enter the text in the very next verse where second feminine singular language can only be understood as a promise to Lady Zion. Both of these options produce a coherent understanding of MT and are thus preferred to textual emendation. The second, anaphoric interpretation appears more plausible because of the contextual link to the feminine entity in 1:13 in the immediate context and in the proximate context of the Book of the Twelve. The same surprise appearance of Lady Zion and Lady Nineveh also appears in Mic 7:8–10, where Lady Zion anticipates the fall of Lady Nineveh.

Even so, something changes at the end of 1:12, where the last two verbal sentences contradict one another (I will/will not humble you). This type of contradiction serves as a contemplative device, forcing the reader to pause and reflect on how to resolve this problem. Similar contradictions appear elsewhere (compare Amos 9:8a with 9:8b and Prov 26:4 with 26:5). Two interpretive avenues suggest themselves: one involving paronomasia and the other involving an anaphoric function of the pronoun to anticipate a character who has not yet appeared. See [Interpreting Nahum 1:12].

This rendering reads the MT as it stands and accounts for the changing verbal subjects by assuming they refer to those entities already mentioned in the text: the plural group (1:9), the masculine entity (1:11), and the second feminine singular direct address (1:11) to Lady Nineveh (and Lady Zion, who had not yet been addressed).

Nahum 1:13–14. Nahum 1:13–14 addresses two topics: the removal of oppression from Lady Zion (1:13) and the death of the king of Assyria (1:14). Nahum 1:13 continues the promise of 1:12bβ with a promise to remove the king of Assyria’s implements of oppression. The promise is delivered directly to a feminine entity who must be interpreted as Lady Zion: “I will break his (the Assyrian king) rod from you (2fs) and I will snap your (2fs) bonds.” The salvific content extrapolates the destruction of the enemy (Lady Nineveh) as a gift of freedom for Lady Zion. Zion’s oppressor in the early to mid-seventh century was the Assyrian power that controlled all of Palestine. The removal of chains and yoke offers a dramatic picture of Jerusalem’s liberation from the Assyrians. Historically, this process was decades in the making as Assyria’s ability to control the far reaches of its western territories receded after the middle of the seventh century, finally culminating in Assyria’s demise in 612 BCE. The verse also differs from most of Nahum in its focus on the “positive” implications of Nineveh’s destruction *for Judah* and the language reminiscent of Deutero-Isaiah texts (compare 1:13 with Isa 52:2 and Nah 2:1 [Eng 1:15]).

Nahum 1:14 does not refer to Lady Nineveh but addresses a masculine singular entity that, given the possibilities, must be the Assyrian king. This king is the same entity mentioned in 1:11 as the one who went forth from Nineveh devising plots against YHWH. Reference to his grave not only sets the scene for the two parallel descriptions of Nineveh’s destruction in Nahum 2–3 but also anticipates Nahum 3:18–19, which concludes the book with deadly metaphors referring to the “slumber” of the king’s shepherds and the king of Assyria’s “mortal wound.”

Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1) Cites Isaiah 52:7



The two texts are too similar not to be related to one another in some way.

Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1): Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off.

Isaiah 52:7: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

Nahum 1:15–2:2. Nahum 1:15–2:2 (MT 2:1–3) continues the two motifs, promise to Judah and threat to Assyria, by explicitly addressing the feminine characters (Zion and Nineveh) and the king (also called the wicked one here). Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1) cites Isaiah 52:7 in a deliberate and meaningful way. [Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1) Cites Isaiah 52:7] While Isaiah 52:7 announces YHWH’s return to Zion after the exile, in Nahum 1:15 the quote functions as the pronouncement of the end of the *Assyrian* occupation in the Book of the Twelve. This idea that

Nahum 1:15 draws on a Deutero-Isaiah text has implications for dating the final form of Nahum.

The implications of Nahum 1:15 in its context are significant. Even though the majority of Nahum deals with the downfall of Assyria (or more specifically, of Nineveh), the message of Nahum is not directed to Nineveh. Rather, it speaks to a Judean audience. Moreover, unlike the account of Jonah taking a message of judgment to Nineveh, Nahum offers no call for repentance, no call to change, and no hope for a reprieve for Assyria. Instead, it functions largely as a report of Assyrian destruction.

Moreover, Isaiah 52:7 *assumes* several things. First, it assumes that the fall of Babylon has occurred. Second, it assumes that Lady Zion experiences this news as “good news” and “peace.” Third, and most importantly, Isaiah 52:7 assumes that the downfall of Babylon is the result of God’s power. This image of God controlling the big events of history intentionally reminds readers that God is really the one in control. Further, the text implies that life is not a collection of random events but that the events of life are connected as signs that “God reigns.” By contrast, the message of Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1) focuses on Judah’s response to the news of *Assyria’s* downfall. Nahum 1:15 not only *assumes* a sense of jubilation at the news but also *assumes* this news will be a sign of answered prayer. This is what lies behind the call to fulfill your vows.

The word “wicked” in 1:15 (*bēlîyaʿal*) is the same one translated “wickedness” in 1:11. The singular noun in 1:15 refers to a person doing wickedness. The derivation of the word is debated. Perhaps the most common approach treats the word as a combination of *bēlî* (meaning “without”) and *yaʿal* (a hifil imperfect form of *ʾālâh* meaning “he caused to grow”). The derived, figurative meaning, then, would mean something like “without success” or “useless.” Whatever the derivation, it is twice used in Nahum. Nahum 1:11 uses the term to modify the “counselor” who plots evil and who goes forth from Nineveh. In other words, “wicked counselor” refers to the king of Assyria there. The same person could be intended in 1:15, since the masculine figure in 1:14 clearly refers to the king. Despite the plural verbs of the NRSV, the Hebrew is singular: “he is utterly cut off.” It thus speaks *primarily* about the king of Assyria while only secondarily about the Assyrians who would accompany the king. [Belial as the Evil One]

Belial as the Evil One

ΩIn contrast to the meaning of *bēliya'al* in Nahum, its interpretation in intertestamental literature and the New Testament illustrates that the term increasingly came to be seen as a personification of evil. By New Testament times, Paul even uses it as an antithetical parallel in juxtaposition to Christ (2 Cor 6:15). The term appears as *Beliar* in Jubilees (1:20; 15:34) and the Martyrdom of Isaiah (1:9; 2:4; 3:11), the latter of which also calls Beliar the angel of lawlessness. Beliar is also the name used in the “Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs” to refer to a figure associated with the second level of Hades and with sexual promiscuity or temptations in general (Reuben 4:8, 11; 6:4; Simeon 5:3; Levi 3:3; 18:12; 19:2; Judah 26:3; Issachar 6:1; 7:7; 9:8; Dan 1:7; 4:7; 5:1, 10, 11; Naphtali 2:6; 3:2; Asher 1:8; 3:2; Joseph 7:4; 20:2; Benjamin 3:3, 5, 8; 6:1, 7; 7:1, 2). The Damascus Document (1QMDam 36:16) refers to this figure as *Belial*.

The infinitive absolute form of the verb “to guard” in Nahum 2:1 (MT 2:2) functions as an imperative by its logical connection to the preceding actions. Such a construction is not unlike those found in Isaiah 37:30 and Amos 4:5, even though in Nahum 2:1, a perfect verb has interrupted the sequence. The NRSV has “a shatterer” for the word *mēqîš*, but the root *pûš* means scatter. Several commentators have suggested emendations (for example: Keller, *CAT* 11b:119 suggests reading the root *pûš* and translates as “scatter”; Rudolph, *KAT* 13/3, 160 has suggested the root *pāšaš*, meaning “shatter,” which appears to be what NRSV has translated, but the latter involves an unusual form of the *hifil* participle since MT has a *yod*, but double *ayin* verbs do not). The need to

emend appears unwarranted, however, since the idea of scattering the people of the city makes sense in this context.

Nahum 2:1 (MT 2:2) addresses both Lady Nineveh and the king of Assyria when it continues the feminine addresses of the previous verse (2:1a) and addresses a masculine character (2:1b), but whereas Lady Zion was the addressee in Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1), Lady Nineveh appears to be the one addressed in 2:1a (come up against *you*) to warn her to guard the ramparts. The imperatives of 2:1b (MT 2:2b), however, are second masculine singular, and must then be part of the address to the king. This change makes sense, since at least one of the phrases in 2:1b (gird up your loins) would hardly fit a feminine addressee. Formally then, Lady Nineveh and her king are told to prepare for an impending attack.

Nahum 2:2 speaks parenthetically of the restoration of Jacob/Israel. It interrupts the command to prepare for the attack delivered to Lady Nineveh and her king, but while its message concerns a promise of restoration for Jacob/Israel, its position can only mean that it presumes the attack on Assyria (the description of which follows in 2:3–13) will be conducted by YHWH with the purpose of restoring Judah/Israel. Thematically, this verse parallels the imagery of 1:15 (MT 2:1), which interprets the news of Assyria’s demise as “good news” for Judah.

Unlike the battle description that begins in 2:3, Nahum 1:9–2:2 (MT 1:9–2:3) needs to be interpreted in light of its frequently changing speakers/addressees. English translations of the passage do not clearly indicate these changes, which are quite prominent in Hebrew. Thus, a relatively clear picture develops from a careful analysis of 1:9–2:2, though the intricacies of the action described in these verses are not easily resolved. The rapidly changing foci, perspectives, and styles argue that this unit reflects a composite unity, but one whose coherence can still be determined by tracing what happens to the characters who appear within these verses.

The passage is framed (1:9; 2:2) by references to YHWH and a group whose identity syntactically presupposes the enemies mentioned in the theophanic hymn. Within the remainder of the unit, one finds alternating references to YHWH (1:11, 12, 14), to a masculine character who must be equated with the king of Assyria (1:11, 12, 13, 15; 2:1), and to two feminine, personified cities: Lady Zion (1:12, 13, 15) and Lady Nineveh (1:11; 2:1). Because of the rapid changes, tracking the action in this passage is easier by characters than by transitions between the lines. The king of Assyria, who is presented as opposing YHWH (1:11), leaves Nineveh with an army to invade Judah (1:12). However, YHWH announces that the king's burden of Zion will cease (1:13); that YHWH will make the king's grave (1:14); and that the king be cut off (1:15). The last mention of the king has him back in Nineveh being warned of the coming attack against his own city (2:1b).

As for Lady Zion, she is the object of the king's attack (1:12) but receives a reprieve from YHWH (1:12b) and is thus liberated from his oppression (1:13). Then she is told to rejoice and pay her vows (1:15) because Assyria will no longer oppress her (1:15). Lady Nineveh is addressed directly as the place from whence the king of Assyria departs (1:11) and who receives word she is about to be attacked (2:1).⁴

CONNECTIONS

As much as one tries to hear this prophetic text in its ancient context as an affirmation of divine power and providence, one must also come to grips with the dark side of such theological paradigms. A major presupposition of Nahum assumes God to be a

kind of divine avenger of human suffering, willing to use cosmic force against finite human power. For those suffering oppression, such images offer comfort that “my enemies will have to answer to God,” and they offer hope that “things will not always remain as they are now.” Unfortunately, however, this theology, that God is my avenger, is not only used by those suffering oppression; throughout history, this theology has also been used by those who hold power (military, political, economic, or ecclesial) to justify their actions to maintain that power. In these cases, the rhetoric of divine judgment becomes an excuse to use power for one’s own benefit rather than to establish justice.

How does one know whether a cry for divine judgment is one that seeks to right a wrong or one that furthers a misguided cause? There is no easy answer, but some principles do emerge when reflecting on the biblical message. First, those holding the reins of power (in whatever form) become much more susceptible to substituting their own agenda for the goals of God. Biblical texts that use this language approach the topic from the underside—from the side of those physically suffering hardships in the face of overwhelming strength. Nahum is certainly no exception. Judah was controlled economically and politically for the better part of a century by the Assyrians. This message of justice served to Nineveh does not mention anyone other than YHWH as the one who will be responsible for Nineveh’s overthrow.

Second, the target of divine retribution is the one who violated YHWH’s intention because that is the issue that invoked judgment in the first place. Occasionally the biblical text speaks of YHWH intervening directly into human activity, but much more common is the use of one nation to punish another (perhaps explicitly at God’s initiative). In such cases, however, YHWH frequently makes explicit that certain limits are placed on the attacking nation. Theologically, this means God, not humans, becomes the arbiter of ultimate power. In practical terms, however, vengeance is a dangerous thing because, historically, what tends to stop one nation from using violence toward another is the encountering of violence, real or potential, from the other side. It is doubtful that an Assyrian or Babylonian king would have recognized their actions as part of YHWH’s plan for the world. Yet that is how biblical texts portray Assyrian and Babylonian control of Palestine (see Isa 10:5-6 for Assyria and Hab 1:5-12 for Babylon). These texts go on to say that

YHWH will punish Assyria (see Isa 10:7-12) and Babylon (see Hab 3:13-15 in context) when (not *if*) they do more damage than God commissioned them to do. In most every instance, YHWH's tool of punishment becomes the oppressor, who then becomes the object of YHWH's punishment.

When one considers this theological claim, its problematic implications quickly surface: the idea that God uses the political aspirations of one nation to avenge injustice on another raises the problem of the violence and death inflicted on the innocent in both countries. Rhetorically, works like Nahum serve as a warning about the abuse of power, not as justification for military action on behalf of God. While the Bible is candid in acknowledging God's role in this activity, trusting other human beings to make those determinations in our day should not be accepted uncritically or blindly.

NOTES

1. See Aaron Scharf, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuch* (BZAW 260; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997) 248–51.

2. See the discussion in James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter) 158–61.

3. See comment on Hab 2:17 and the discussion there of the deforestation of Lebanon described by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

4. See E. Kautzsch, GKC (trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) §113z.

TAUNTING A FALLEN SUPERPOWER

Nahum 2:3–3:19

COMMENTARY

The second half of Nahum draws attention to the fall of Nineveh using two parallel poetic passages (2:3-13; 3:1-19) that anticipate the city's destruction, reflect upon its significance, and taunt it with graphic, brutal images. Each passage has its own character, exhibits its own logical progression, and associates itself with other portions of Nahum and the Book of the Twelve. The rhetorical effect of these passages emphasizes Nineveh's certain destruction and the mistaken illusion of power that destruction revealed. In at least two places these accounts allude to the city or the battle in a way that is so tantalizingly close to the actual events that they may even reflect Nineveh's location or traditions about the actual events of the final battle (see discussion of the role of the rivers in 2:6; 3:8; and the response to the battle in 3:14).

Battle Scene and Reflection, 2:3-13 (MT 2:4-14)

Nahum 2:3-13 (MT 2:4-14) presents a series of poetic vignettes that progressively depict an attack on Nineveh (2:3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10) and then reflect on the significance of Nineveh's fall (2:11-13). The vignettes show a clear progression from preparation for the attack to its aftermath. Although they are not eyewitness accounts of the actual events, they provide such a graphic portrayal of a city's destruction that they give the sense of a horrendous battle.

One can hardly escape the vivid battle images created by 2:3-13. Warriors are clothed in red; metal glistens from chariots; and spears are shaken (or horsemen move forward). The red colors associated with the warriors have sometimes mistakenly been taken to refer to bloody clothes instead of the color of the Babylonian army's attire.

Historically, the identity of the army should be understood as the Babylonians, though the enemy is not specified. A more ambiguous term is used in 2:1, “the scatterer.” Some see this term as a metaphor for YHWH, assuming that the army attacks at YHWH’s command.¹ This may be true conceptually and poetically, but this image implies that YHWH uses human, not heavenly, armies as the means of the attack. This battle imagery does not depict the attack of a heavenly army (such as in Joel 2:1-11), but a powerful human foe who completely devastates Nineveh.

With images of moving chariots, the battle scene moves forward in 2:4, while 2:5 reports on the futility of the Assyrian commander’s actions in calling forth his hapless nobles to lead the defense. While Babylonian chariots charge, Assyrian nobles stumble to their defensive positions.

Beginning with 2:6-8, the description quickly moves to the end game. Nineveh does not last long. Using metaphors appropriate for a river city like Nineveh, the poet describes the opening of the gates, which causes the city to succumb to the onslaught of the enemy in much the same way as a river would flood its banks. Some ancient sources report the fall of Nineveh as though the river had literally overflowed, but such reports misunderstand the poetry, especially in 2:8, where waters (like the captured women) run away from the city. The command to exile the population (2:7)

probably has a basis in actual events, given the common practice of the Babylonians and the emphasis on taking prisoners one finds in the Babylonian Chronicles. [Babylonian Chronicles]

The focus of 2:9-10 shifts from descriptions of Nineveh’s fall to the aftermath of its devastation. Soldiers are commanded to plunder Nineveh because of its great wealth. Mention of the city’s destruction (2:10a) comes via three Hebrew words whose alliterative associations are nicely reflected in the NRSV translation (devastation, desolation, and destruction), while 2:10b provides four responses of the people that cumulatively depict fear and submission.

Nahum 2:11-13 (MT 2:12-13) offer a satirical rhetorical unit that reflects on the implications

Babylonian Chronicles

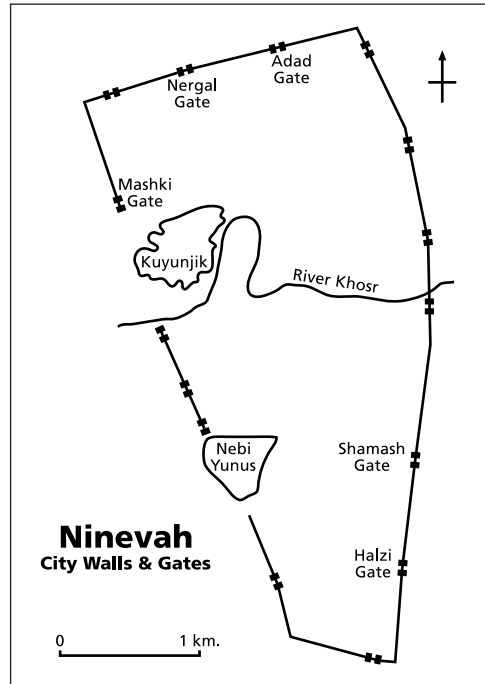


The Babylonian Chronicles are a collection of royal archives dating to the time of the Babylonian kings in the seventh and sixth centuries. While they are a source of great historical information, one has to be aware that events are frequently recounted to put their own kings in the best light. Nevertheless, in the descriptions of the campaigns against Assyria, frequent reference is made to the taking of prisoners without number. For example, the annals of Nabopolassar (626–605) cover the tenth through the seventeenth years of the king’s reign. The annals record no fewer than seven times in this section when the Babylonian king specifically recounts the taking of many prisoners in the annual summation of battles. The only battles that do not specify the taking of prisoners are battles in which no claim of victory is made or where the entire population is destroyed according to the king.

Nineveh's Destruction in Ancient Sources

The destruction of Nineveh is recounted in the writings of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus in the first century BCE, in which the king is said to have known of an ancient prophecy that Nineveh would not be overtaken until the river became its enemy. In his account, during the third year of the siege, the river destroyed a section of the city wall 20 furlongs wide. This tradition has sometimes been taken as historical evidence that Nineveh fell after a flood demolished part of the wall. Apart from the fact that much of this account is of questionable historical accuracy, including the fact that Diodorus Siculus names the river Euphrates rather than the Tigris or Khosr, modern excavations of ancient Nineveh show conclusively that the city wall was not destroyed by flood, but that the attack came primarily through the Halzi gate (in the southeast corner of the city) and the Adad gate (in the far north of the city, over two miles away), both well away from the river. The presence of skeletal remains of around two dozen bodies of soldiers, still strewn about the Halzi gate as they fell in battle, shows this gate was the site of fierce fighting that the Assyrians lost. The battle plan seems to have involved a simultaneous attack at opposite ends of the city that would have split the Assyrian forces, perhaps allowing an attack through the eastern (river) entries that would have likely trapped Assyrian forces.

See D. Stronach, and S. Lumsden, "UC Berkeley's Excavations at Nineveh." *BA* 55 (1992): 227–33.



of Nineveh's fall. In doing so, it satirizes Nineveh, quite appropriately using the image of the lion since a number of Assyrian artifacts represent the strength of the country by the king's prowess over lions.

The lion imagery in this passage applies to Assyria and its king, warriors, and people. Reference to the den and cave as the refuge of the lion, young lion, and cubs likely refers to Nineveh, the capital city—a source of protection where Assyrians made their home. In 2:11, this den is the place where the lion goes for safety, but the rhetorical question assumes it has been destroyed. Nahum 2:12, by contrast, describes the purpose the dens had served, as the home where the lion took its prey. The resulting metaphor is then explicated in 2:13. The powerful lion has been made powerless, its cubs killed, and its home plundered.

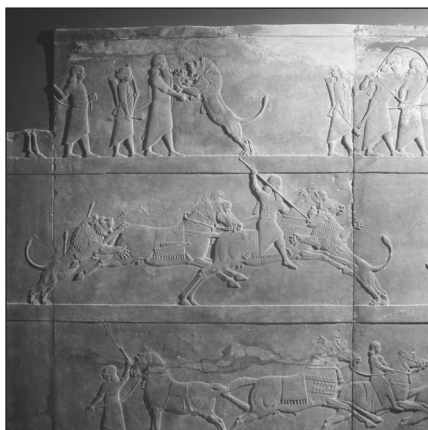
Nahum 2:13 draws chapter 2 to a close in a way that answers the question of 2:12 by referring to the destruction of Nineveh earlier in the chapter and anticipating the second description of Nineveh's destruction in 3:1–17. In short, it says YHWH has cut off the lion's ability to feed its pride. It makes this claim, however, by referring to

Relief of the King's Hunting Scene

The picture on the right is an Assyrian relief of a hunting scene from the north wall of the palace of King Ashurbanipal (669–631 BCE) that was erected in the middle of the seventh century. It is one of several such scenes at the palace demonstrating the king's power over the lion. It is not known, of course, whether the author of Nah 2:11-12 had ever seen the palace, but it would stand to reason that word of these pictures circulated among the elite of the ancient world. The picture below comes from an earlier Assyrian king, Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). For evidence and discussion of the full extent of this imagery, see Brent A. Stawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion?: Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).



King Ashurnasirpal II hunting lions, a lion leaping at the king's chariot. Assyrian relief, 9th C. BCE. From the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Ashurbanipal kills the lion with his sword (top); the king kills a lion but his spare horse is attacked by another wounded lion (middle); a beater alarms some gazelle (lower).

Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh. Late Assyrian, c. 645 BCE. (Credit: Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

both major sections of the description of Assyria's downfall: the chariots (see 2:3, 4; 3:2) and swords that devour (3:15; see also 3:3), and the young lions (from 2:11-12).

Nahum 2 and 3



J. O'Brien summarizes aptly:


Nahum 3 parallels Nahum 2 in several ways. *Thematically*, Nahum 3 repeats many of the motifs of Nahum 2—also personifying Nineveh as a woman and offering yet another glimpse of Nineveh's fall. *Stylistically*, the chapter uses many of the poetic features employed in ch. 2—simile, personification, direct address, verbless sentences, and assonance and alliteration. *Structurally*, both chapters follow similar patterns—each begins with a description of the city's siege; stops to describe Nineveh in metaphorical terms; returns to the images of the siege; compares the Assyrians to animals; and ends with an announcement of disaster. . . . In its recapitulation, however, ch. 3 intensifies all the elements of ch. 2. Nineveh is imagined not just as a woman but as a prostitute; her punishment is not just exile but the sexual humiliation of a whore. Scenes of the battle are more graphic, and the victims less stylized.

Julia Myers O'Brien, *Nahum* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 66.

A Second Taunt, 3:1-19

In describing the material in the early Nahum corpus (see discussion of 1:9–2:2), it was noted that Nahum 3:1-15 reiterates judgment against Nineveh by providing a second taunt song. Nahum 2 and 3 also contain thematic, stylistic, and structural parallels. [Nahum 2 and 3] Thus, Nahum 3 plays a significant role by repeating and also by intensifying the message of judgment against Nineveh that dominates Nahum. These powerful images need to be understood in their literary contexts; that is, in their function within

Overview of Nahum 3 Scholarship

 Recent scholarship has treated the literary units within Nah 3 quite diversely. M. Floyd sees five brief (but presumably independent) units comprising the second half of the book (2:12–3:19) whose “arrangement” repeats the description of Nineveh’s overthrow from 2:1-11: two prophecies of punishment against a foreign nation (2:12-13 [Eng 2:13-14] and 3:1-7 [subdivided into accusation in 1-4; punishment in 5-7]); a prophetic interrogation in 3:8-12; a mock sentinel report in 3:13-17; and a mock dirge in 3:18-19. O. P. Robertson sees three major sections of a single composition, each with a rhetorical question that helps focus on a different reason for the punishment. Each unit contains a rhetorical question that implies Nineveh deserves punishment: 3:1-7, because of Nineveh’s own sin (3:7); 3:8-13, just like Thebes (3:8); 3:14-19, despite its strength (3:19). J. J. M. Roberts sees two independent units: 3:1-17 is a woe (*hōy*) oracle held together by direct address, and 3:18-19 is (probably) an independent oracle, appropriately placed. J. O’Brien describes the chapter in four sections, frequently noting parallels to Nah 2 in theme, style, and structure: 3:1-3, a sarcastic woe (that intensifies 2:5-11); 3:4-7, a prostitute section (that expands and intensifies the feminine imagery of Nah 2); 3:8-13, a satirical taunt (threatens Nineveh with the fate of Thebes); and 3:14-19, a facetious call to defense. K. Seybold treats the chapter as a complex compositional unit that has combined pieces of several preexisting units: 3:1, 4 is a woe

speech; 3:2-3 is originally introduced 2:2, 4-13, but has been moved into the woe speech, 2:14; 3:5-7 is judgment speech against Nineveh; and the largest section, 3:8-19, a three-strophe poem (8-10, 11-15, 16-19), concludes the corpus. H. Schulz describes 2:12–3:19 as a redactional composition that combines two preexisting songs (an eschatological divine judgment in 2:12-14 [Eng 2:11-13] + 3:4-6; and a mock lamentation in 3:7-18) into a unified whole in order to complete the book by incorporating *part* of a song describing Nineveh’s destruction (3:1-3) and an ending connecting this section to the previous one (2:2–2:11). R. L. Smith deals with this chapter as four units: 3:1-7 is judgment/woe oracle (with 3:2-4 providing the reason and 3:5-7 announcing a future threat); 3:8-13 a Thebes analogy; 3:14-17 a satirical warning and call to prepare; and 3:18-19 a pronouncement of ultimate defeat (addressed to king).

Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2* (FOTL 22; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 68–78.

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 99–132.

J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) 67–77.

Julia Myers O’Brien, *Nahum* (Readings; London: Sheffield, 2002) 66–72.

Klaus Seybold, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1991) 28–41.

Hermann Schulz, *Das Buch Nahum. Eine redaktionskritische Untersuchung* (BZAW 129; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973) 92–102.

Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* (WBC; Word Books: Waco, 1984) 84–90.

the rhetorical units of the chapter, within the early corpus, and within an expanded literary context—the Book of the Twelve.

Nahum 3 falls into three rhetorical sections (3:1-7, 8-17, 18-19) indicated by genre, speaker, addressee, and theme. While disjunctions within this chapter are often noted, the nature of the divisions does not lend itself to easy solutions. In fact, the diversity of opinions on this passage creates a paradox. On the one hand, even a cursory overview of scholarship demonstrates the chapter is not, in all likelihood, the composition of a single author. [Overview of Nahum 3 Scholarship] On the other hand, the interrelated nature of these elements suggests they have been carefully woven together. Further, their careful combination makes it difficult to specify clear lines of demarcation between the units. Nevertheless, these building blocks exhibit tensions that suggest they have experienced editorial shaping for the early Nahum corpus and for the Book of the Twelve (in order to anticipate the message of Habakkuk).

Woe Oracle and Divine Response, 3:1-7

Nahum 3:1-7 has an internal logic dictated by the elements of a prophetic woe oracle.² These elements include *hōy* (“woe, alas”), followed by an addressee (“city of bloodshed”), and a brief accusation in 3:1; a description of the disaster (3:2-3); and a reason for the disaster (3:4). Further, though not always present in woe oracles, Nahum 3:4-7 provides a divine response, the only place in Nahum 3 where first person speech appears.³ While the woe oracle form explains the rhetorical flow, it functions as an accusation, not a lamentation. The material does not intend to elicit sympathy for Nineveh, but to explain and, in many ways, to rejoice over its demise.

With rapid-fire sentences (mostly nominative clauses), 3:2-3 describes an enemy attack with a series of images that paints a picture of the danger facing Nineveh. The images change from things related to moving the troops (whips, wheels, horses, chariots, and horsemen), to the weapons (sword and spear), to the victims (multitude, corpses, and bodies). The cumulative rhetorical effect conveys the utter devastation of the city.

The style of address changes in 3:5, both in terms of the divine first person style of the speaker and in terms of the direct address of Nineveh using second feminine singular (2fs) forms. The former is limited to 3:5-7, while the latter continues throughout most of 3:4-17. The direct address to a particular city, such as Nineveh, is not unique, for it draws on a much larger tradition of personifying cities, not only in biblical prophetic literature but also in west Semitic literature.⁴ As such, this tradition allows the poet to speak about the city on many levels, both literal and figurative. Here, the direct address connotes a level of intimacy that makes the brutality of the content all the more shocking. YHWH accuses Lady Nineveh of fornication and harlotry, and of seducing nations with the intent of fornication.

Nahum 3:5 formally indicates YHWH as the speaker by the first person singular forms, followed by the utterance of YHWH formula. As well, the use of the particle *hinnî* followed by a nominative clause suggests hurried action.⁵ The specific combination “*hinnî. . . ʔlayik*” appears elsewhere only in Jeremiah 21:13; Ezekiel 21:8; and Nahum 2:14, where it clearly means “I am against you.” This introduction leaves little doubt that judgment will follow. Nahum 3:5-6 graphically depicts the shame and humiliation

inflicted by YHWH upon Lady Nineveh. She is stripped naked by YHWH, an act of utter humiliation in the ancient world and a disturbing picture theologically for modern communities of faith. Further, 3:6 multiplies the insult by casting YHWH in the light of a brutal avenger throwing refuse upon the humiliated woman. This disturbing imagery needs to be explored poetically, sociologically, and theologically. Nahum 3:4, 5–6 uses sexual imagery extensively to portray the fate of Lady Nineveh. Her sexual charms as a prostitute (3:4) have helped her become wealthy and alluring. Conversely, her *public* nakedness describes violence as the work of YHWH but draws upon assumptions of shame that are deeply embedded in the cultures of the ancient Near East. Finally, Nahum 3:7 concludes the divine response with a summary of Nineveh's devastation and two rhetorical questions designed to isolate Lady Nineveh as an object of horror, not pity, after her destruction.

Composite Taunt Song, 3:8–17

The rhetorical flow of Nahum 3:8–17 is comparatively easy to follow. Nahum 3:8–11 provides a relatively self-contained unit that draws an analogy between the fate of the Egyptian capital Thebes and Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Nahum 3:12–17 develops a complex portrayal of a prophetic taunt of Nineveh.

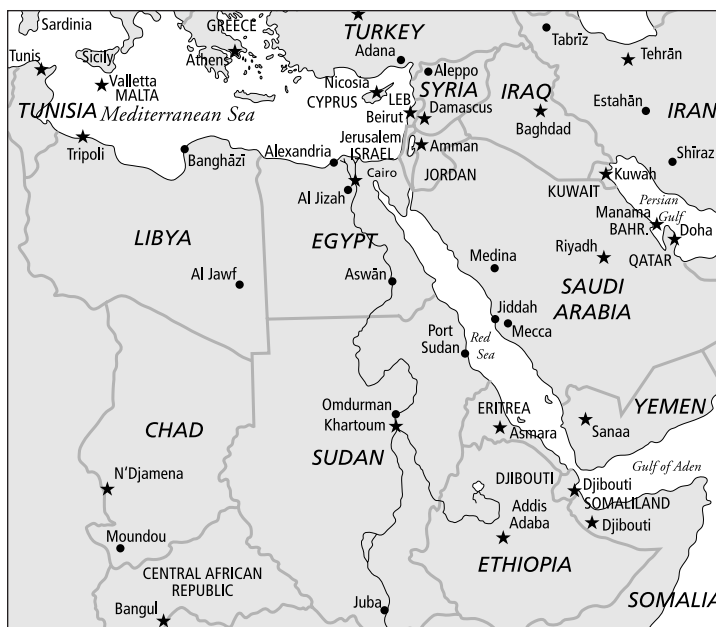
Nineveh Will Fall Like Thebes, 3:8–11

Nahum 3:8 begins a new thematic unit that compares Nineveh to the Egyptian capital Thebes (modern Luxor) to show that Nineveh's pride and strength are misplaced. The beginning (3:8a) and end (3:11) of the unit continue to address Lady Nineveh in second feminine singular style, while the middle of the unit (3:8ab–10) speaks about Thebes using feminine forms. Nahum 3:8 begins with an ironic rhetorical question ("Are you better than Thebes?"), ironic since Thebes was devastated by the Assyrians in 663 BCE, an event to which Nahum 3:8 obviously alludes. The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal largely ceded the control of day-to-day operations of Egypt to Psammetichus I (664–610 BCE), Prince of Libya, with whom Assyria had made an alliance. Geographically, Thebes was located in the crook of the Nile so that it had a natural defense around most of the city, a trait hinted at by the poetic reference to the "sea" that surrounds her.⁶ The identity of the speaker is not sig-

Poetic Depiction of Thebes's Allies



Nah 3:9 describes the allies of Thebes in a way that suggests they function poetically as her buffer against the Assyrian threat, but one that obviously failed her. The mention of Egypt, Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Somalia), and Lubim (Libya) essentially marks the extent of Egypt in the 25th dynasty. In doing so, it covers the entire region that Assyria (modern Saudi Arabia and Iraq) had to penetrate in order to reach Thebes (located in modern Sudan).



naled in this unit, leading the reader to assume YHWH is still speaking.

Nahum 3:9 continues to describe the power of Thebes but turns its attention to Thebes's allies. It refers to Cush, Put, and Lubim as allies of Egypt. [\[Poetic Depiction of Thebes's Allies\]](#) Cush refers to the region of modern Ethiopia. Put and Lubim often appear together in biblical texts (Isa 66:19; 2 Chr 16:8) and probably refer to regions near Somalia (Put) and Libya (Lubim = the Libyans).⁷ Together, these four allies represent the region of northeast Africa. Thebes is roughly in the center of these three regions, since Ethiopia and Somalia lay to the southeast of Thebes (located on the Nile in modern Sudan) and Libya lay to the northwest. During the seventh century, the twenty-fifth dynasty (712–664 BCE) that ruled Egypt from Thebes was Ethiopian. Given the political constellation, one can see how the poet could describe Ethiopia (Cush) as the might of Thebes. The twenty-sixth dynasty had Libyan roots (Psammetichus I was from Libya, but unified upper and lower Egypt while largely keeping up appearances of loyalty to Assyria).⁸ Poetically, the regions mentioned in 3:9 form another geographic barrier to Assyrian incursion, yet one that the Assyrians managed to breach. In grand terms, 3:8-9 together portray two barriers protecting Thebes: (1) the Mediterranean and Red seas limited access to the capital; and (2) an alliance of forces in regions to the north posed difficulties for any invader.

Nahum 3:10 reminds Nineveh that Thebes ultimately fell. Using traditional military language, 3:10 depicts the overthrow of Thebes as one of exile and depopulation. Just as Assyria destroyed the great power of Egypt, so will Assyria itself be destroyed. In another ironic twist, the rhetoric of 3:11 turns the focus back to Lady Nineveh, portraying her as oblivious to her impending fate (“Moreover, you [2fs] are drunk. You [2fs] will hide yourself. Moreover, you [2fs] will seek safety from an enemy”). The motif of hiding appears again in 3:18, where it applies to the king’s shepherds and officials. Lady Nineveh is ironically reminded of her power (since it was her king that conquered Thebes) even as her former power is mocked. Hence, 3:8-11 warns Lady Nineveh that she does not see the danger approaching.

Taunting Nineveh, 3:12-17

Nahum 3:12-17 continues to mock Lady Nineveh while threatening her with destruction, but the frequently changing imagery leaves these verses with a less cohesive flow, even though the ideas within them are generally easy to decipher. Paying attention to recurring motifs, these verses unfold in a loose thematic manner, with an A-B-B-A structure.

A 3:12 Botanical metaphor depicting a tree with ripe fruit ready to be devoured

B 3:13 Gates and bars of the city/land are wide open

B' 3:14 Call to repair the city walls, but actions are doomed to fail

A' 3:15-17 Your locusts will be devoured by other locusts

Nevertheless, these verses show signs of more than one hand in their formulations. Nahum 3:12 depicts Assyria as a fig tree with fruit so ripe it is ready to be plucked (“All your fortresses are fig trees with ripe fruit. If they are shaken, they will fall into the mouth of the devourer”). The implications are clear: Nineveh’s fruit, its wealth, has made it desirable to others, putting it at risk of an attack from one who wants to devour it. This metaphorical imagery plays right into the description of the locust attacks in 3:15-17*.

Nahum 3:13 continues the taunt against Nineveh, but warns her that her defenses have broken down (“your [2fs] gates of the land; your [2fs] bars of the city”). Given the reputation of the brutal

power of Assyria, this metaphor seeks to mock Nineveh's might by portraying her people as weak. The speaker compares her people to women. Then, however, Lady Nineveh is mocked with the kind of sexual innuendo that appeared in 3:4-6, portraying the city's availability as "the gates of your land opened wide." The mocking tone makes modern readers cringe but illustrates the depth of feelings in the late seventh century concerning the end of Assyrian hegemony.

Nahum 3:14 is intricately tied to the impending attack against Nineveh anticipated in 3:13, syntactically by the second feminine singular references that continue, and conceptually by the commands to prepare for battle and repair the city walls. Since 3:13 depicted Nineveh's gates as wide open, the description in 3:14 of Nineveh preparing to patch its walls with mortar made from clay functions as a reaction to the danger. However, this reaction is deemed futile in 3:15: "There, fire will devour you and the sword will cut you down."

The metaphorical language changes with 3:15, which now focuses not on preparations for the attack but on the effects of the battle. The first part of this verse (3:15a) is not difficult to understand in this respect: fire devours and sword cuts down. These aggressive images describe the enemy attack as a monumental surge of power that cannot be stopped. In 3:15b-16, however, three things change: (1) the syntax becomes confusing because of changing addressees; (2) the metaphors change the focus from the attacker to the one being attacked; and (3) the sparse language of the extended context ceases and is replaced by four locust sayings.

Translating Nahum 3:15-16

AΩ The translation of 3:15-16 changes metaphors, requiring careful attention to the way the lines relate to one another.

^{15aα}There, fire will devour you (2fs).

^{15aβ}(The) sword will cut you (2fs) down.

^{15aγ}It will devour (3fs) you (2fs) like the hopping locust (*yeleq*).

^{15bα}**He multiplied himself (3ms [or 2ms]) like the hopping locust (*yeleq*).**

^{15bβ}Multiply yourself (2fs) like the swarming locust (*'arbeh*).

¹⁶Increase (2fs) your traders more than the stars of heaven.

The hopping locust (*yeleq*) spreads out and then flies away.

One must follow the logic of 3:15-16 closely, and this requires a cautious translation. [Translating Nahum 3:15-16] First, regarding the changing addressees, two feminine singular noun/verb combinations (3:15aα and 3:15aβ) give way to a third feminine singular verb in 3:15aγ ("it will devour you like the hopping locust"), whose subject is ambiguous. The fire metaphor devouring like a locust makes better sense poetically, though sword is the closest feminine noun. The third feminine singular verb may also be a feminine collective.⁹ Nevertheless, the most likely explanation is that the antecedent should be understood as "fire" for conceptual reasons, though the syntax remains awkward. It is impor-

tant to note that 3:15a γ sets up a new metaphor, or more accurately it introduces a simile for a metaphor (fire is like a hopping locust).

Second, the changing similes and metaphors warn those being attacked in 3:15a α – β by fire and sword, while the statement in 3:15a γ describes the attackers: *it* (3fs) will be aggressive like the hopping locust (*yeleq*). By contrast, 3:15b α again admonishes Lady Nineveh (2fs) as the one being attacked to multiply herself like the swarming locust (*arbeh*), knowing it will be a futile act. Nahum 3:16a, 17 give the impression that the speaker continues the ironic exhortation to prepare for battle by increasing its size, with the futility of such action emphasized again as the destructive power of the *yeleq* in 3:16b.

Third, the locust imagery in this passage mushrooms like, well, locusts. Nevertheless, the difficulty in maintaining a clear sense of continuity suggests the possibility that the text has been expanded, but with which phrases and why remain questions to be answered. Are the four references to locusts merely a stylistic device to pile devastating images upon one another, or are the sentences coherent as the work of a single poet? This question is not easy to answer. The use of a stylistic device from a single hand could be possible, but it is unlikely because the changing addressees complicate their identification markedly. One of the lines (3:15b α) is more confusing than the others in this respect. It interrupts the logical connection of 3:15a γ and 3:15b β and poses a complicated syntactical dilemma. It disrupts the logic of the context because of its masculine addressee: “He multiplied himself (3ms [or 2ms]) like the hopping locust” (*yeleq*). Nahum 3:15b α also stands out as syntactically problematic. For these reasons, Nahum 3:15b α should be understood as an explanatory gloss. [The Syntax of Nahum 3:15b α]

The Syntax of Nahum 3:15b α

AO Regarding the syntax, Nah 3:15b α contains a verb that can be parsed either as a *hitpa’el* singular imperative (“multiply yourself”) or a third person *hitpa’el* perfect (“he multiplied himself”). Neither option fits well in this context. The former introduces a masculine character without an antecedent whose identity could only be associated anaphorically with the king, who is not introduced until 3:18. The command itself is also unnecessary because it would repeat the command that follows (3:15b β). The second (3ms) option changes style dramatically by speaking *about* a masculine character. It could be explained as an explanatory gloss by a later reader intending to clarify the imagery, but in actuality only complicating it. These kinds of comments (marginal or supralinear) are well attested in the Qumran scrolls. In this case, the verb refers to Assyria’s enemy (3ms), and the style change is explained by a separate hand whose use of the masculine perhaps resulted from looking at the unpointed text of 3:15a, where the pronominal suffix would look identical. Thus, the 3ms form, with its implicit parenthetical syntax, is preferred as the reading. No changes are required to MT for this reading.

By recognizing Nahum 3:15b α as a gloss, one can thus *make sense* of the remainder of 3:15a,b β , 16 by a careful analysis of the

Three Stages of Nahum 3:14-17

Ω An original unit (on the left) addressing Lady Nineveh has been expanded twice, with the first expansion creating a scenario where one locust (*yeleq*) attacks a second (*'arbeh*). This imagery comports with the locust attacks in Joel 1:4.

¹⁴Draw for yourself waters of the fortress. Strengthen your fortifications. Go into the mud. Trample in the clay. Strengthen the brick.

Original Unit

^{15aα}There, fire will devour you (2fs).
^{15aβ}(The) sword will cut you (2fs) down.

^{15bα}Multiply yourself (2fs) like the swarming locust (*'arbeh*).

¹⁶Increase your traders more than the stars of heaven.

¹⁷Your (2fs) courtiers are like the swarming locust (*'arbeh*)

and your (2fs) scribes are like a swarm of locusts, those encamped in the walls on a cold day.

The sun rises, but the place where they are is not known.

Adding the *yeleq*

^{15aα}There, fire will devour you (2fs).
^{15aβ}(The) sword will cut you (2fs) down.

^{15aγ}**It will devour (3fs) you (2fs) like the hopping locust (*yeleq*).**

^{15bα}Multiply yourself (2fs) like the swarming locust (*'arbeh*).

¹⁶Increase your traders more than the stars of heaven.

The hopping locust (*yeleq*) spreads out and then flies away.

¹⁷Your (2fs) courtiers are like the swarming locust (*'arbeh*)
 and your (2fs) scribes are like a swarm of locusts, those encamped in the walls on a cold day.

The sun rises, but the place where they are is not known.

Explanatory Gloss?

^{15bβ}He (3ms) multiplied himself like the hopping locust (*yeleq*).

After describing the military defeat with similes of fire and sword (3:15a,b), Nah 3:15aγ introduces a metaphor for the enemy that compares the *enemy* to locusts (*yeleq*), an apt metaphor that draws on the overwhelming size and destructive nature of the attacker. Nah 3:15bα then mockingly calls on Lady Nineveh (2fs) to make an effort to withstand the onslaught by multiplying its own numbers like the *'arbeh* (*another* type of locust), a command that parallels a second command to increase in 3:16a. The poetic images of these two lines, however, also presume that these actions on Nineveh's part will be futile. The command to increase traders in 3:16a offers little hope for Nineveh, whose attacker is also fire and sword. Nahum 3:16b then completes the thought by noting the obvious: the *yeleq* will overwhelm Nineveh and move on to its next point of attack.

metaphors, but the unit likely comes from two different hands. [Three Stages of Nahum 3:14-17] The first portion formed the frame for the early Nahum corpus by warning that numerical strength will be no protection (see [Nahum's Early Structure] in Nah 1:9). The expansion reminds the reader of the impending series of locust attacks described in Joel 1:4, where the hopping locust (*yeleq*) will devour what the swarming locust (*'arbeh*) left. Thus, the end of Nahum, like the beginning (see discussion of Nah 1:2b-3a), is expanded in light of Joel's paradigm of history, to imply that the Babylonians will defeat the Assyrians.

As a result, the early portion of Nahum 3:15-17 returns to a motif from the beginning of the early corpus (see 1:12-13*)

expanded with locust imagery from Joel using two words for locusts to convey the message. Assyria appears as one locust (*ʾarbeh*), but it will be no match for its enemy (*yeleq*). The *yeleq* will devour the *ʾarbeh* and move on. For the reader of the Twelve, the image of one locust plague following another powerfully evokes Joel 1:4, in which a series of four such plagues confront the people—an image used as a paradigm for Judah’s history in the Book of the Twelve. The appearance of Joel-language elsewhere in the editorial seams of Nahum signifies these verses as important markers in the unfolding of the meta-narrative presumed by the Book of the Twelve.¹⁰ By incorporating references to *yeleq*, Nahum 3:15-17 brings the text in line with Joel’s paradigm: Babylon (the *yeleq*) overthrows Assyria (the *ʾarbeh*) and keeps going. As the Twelve transitions from Nahum to Habakkuk, Judah’s enemy changes from Assyria to Babylon. Just as Nahum 3 intensifies the imagery associated with Assyria in Nahum 2,¹¹ the enemy in Nahum 3:15-17 anticipates that the enemy in Habakkuk 1 will make Assyria look like a minor problem of the past.¹²

Three stages of Nahum 3:14-17 can thus been isolated. An initial stage that taunted Nineveh with the command to make futile preparations continues from the preceding verses, but parallels the commands in Nahum 1:12-13*. This material was expanded to include a description of the enemy as another locust. A confusing explanatory gloss adds the final piece of the puzzle.

Impending Death of the King, 3:18-19

Nahum 3:18 begins a new unit, but one that is fully cognizant of its location. Nahum 3:18-19 formally addresses the king of Assyria and consistently uses second masculine singular forms to do so. The subject of the verses concerns the scattering of the king’s officials and his people as a sign of the death of the king. The direct address is not a rhetorical device. It completes the picture begun in 3:15-17. Poetically, 3:18 assumes that the devastation that began in 3:15-17 has now progressed. The people are not gathered to save the city. They have left it, presumably under duress. As in 3:17, political and administrative leaders (the so-called shepherds and nobles) have been immobilized. The verbs “sleeping” and “settling down” convey an image of uselessness. Further, the rapid activity of the preparation for battle in 3:14-17 contrasts with the shepherds

who are slumbering in 3:18, and so are completely oblivious to what is happening around them (see Isa 56:10). The image of the nobles who settle down is further extrapolated by the next phrase—“the people are scattered on the mountains.” The imagery conveys a sense of the aftermath of Nineveh’s destruction. Finally, the reference to the lack of someone to gather them implies that the king himself is impotent, unable to do what a king should do—gather and lead his people.

Nahum 3:19 addresses the fate of the king himself. He is depicted as mortally wounded with no hope of surviving the blow that has been delivered. Nahum 3:19a anticipates a weakened empire by speaking to its monarch about his impending death. Nahum 3:19b mocks the king with news that his death will be a cause for celebration far and wide. Those whom he has oppressed will celebrate his demise, and given that Assyria had controlled territory from Mesopotamia to Egypt, that would imply a large group of people.

CONNECTIONS

Nahum 2–3 presents a paradox of violence and comfort. On the one hand, Nahum 2–3 abounds with theologically troublesome imagery. Abuse of Lady Nineveh by YHWH (3:5–6) must be relativized in light of the larger biblical message. The only verse (3:5) in the parallel taunt songs of Nahum 2:3–3:19 that mentions YHWH by name is, unfortunately, the passage that arguably depicts Nineveh’s judgment in the most brutal, violent, humiliating, and dehumanizing manner imaginable. Nahum 3:4–7 depicts Nineveh as a prostitute stripped and publicly ridiculed by YHWH himself. While the Old Testament often uses anthropomorphic images of God to draw analogies humans can understand, sometimes the use of anthropomorphic imagery goes so far in making its point that the passage creates significant tensions when one reads it against the broader biblical message, or when held up to the scrutiny of other times, cultures, and theological paradigms.¹³ This imagery of sexual violence must be rejected as an enduring image of the biblical God. The imagery of the violent downfall of the Assyrians in much of the remainder of the chapter is framed in only slightly less offensive images, but its core message

is still so polemically charged that it is no less daunting for edification as a sermon or teaching lesson. God's messenger rejoices in the proclamation of annihilation of a people, its leaders, and its king. This message undoubtedly reflects genuine human emotions, and it may even have generated hope in Judah, but its focus is one sided. Theological claims that God will punish our enemies are often disappointed. Such "my God is bigger than your god" theology too easily leads to the corollary that "might makes right" and to the exploitation of those unable to defend themselves.

On the other hand, Nahum 2–3 appears in the Christian and Jewish canon, and the idea of God's wrath executed against God's enemies is not a peripheral portrayal of God that can be marginalized to the edges of the biblical message. Especially in faith traditions like Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian, which emphasize taking the Bible seriously as a guide for faith, is it possible to find any word of redemption in a text like Nahum 3? To ignore this passage entirely because of its brutality is to reject a prominent idea of the biblical portrait of a God who will intervene on behalf of God's own people. Nahum 2–3 depicts YHWH as a God capable of and willing to initiate judgment on those acting against God's will. The troublesome theological message of judgment against God's enemies is given powerful expression in the call to rejoice at the fall of a hated enemy. Nevertheless, both Old Testament and New Testament texts speak of God's wrath against God's enemies. The biblical God is not some warm, fuzzy character whose image one can place on the dashboard of a car in hopes of protection. The portrayals of God in both Testaments also depict God as a righteous deity capable of destructive action. Nahum 2–3 merely depicts this idea more graphically than most.

Discerning how to resolve this paradox is no easy matter, but one thing is certain. Violence begets violence. Retaliation leads to retaliation. Anyone who decides to use power and violence to "help God set things right," even to bring an end to oppression and terror, runs the risk of becoming the very thing they sought to stop: the cause of suffering to innocent people. In such cases, it is good to remember the words of Gandhi: "An eye for an eye and we all go blind." This saying provided the backdrop for Quaker singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer to reflect on the cosmic upheaval created not when God arrives in a theophany but when people decide to become the tools of God to bring "A Mean Kind of Justice" into

“A Mean Kind of Justice”



The opening lines of “A Mean Kind of Justice” by Carrie Newcomer depict the cosmic futility of vengeance as a response to violence.

There’s a ring around the moon,
 There’s a chill in the air.
 There’s a mean kind of justice,
 Coming down, coming down.
 Angels wring their hands and put ashes on their heads.
 There’s a mean kind of justice coming down.
 It don’t ever stop a thing,
 An eye for eye, tit for tat.
 And I’ve never seen nobody truly satisfied like that.
 It just rolls around the head eating holes in your heart.
 There’s a mean kind of justice coming down.

Carrie Newcomer, “A Mean Kind of Justice,” *Geography of Light*, 2008.

the world, beginning a cycle of violence. [“A Mean Kind of Justice”] What is clear from the biblical texts dealing with God’s judgment, in most cases, is that they are not written from the standpoint of using human power to accomplish justice. Rather, God is the one who determines the time and place when justice should take place.

Nahum 2–3 testifies to YHWH’s wrath against a powerful nation *on behalf of* those who have suffered at the hand of that nation. In this respect, Assyria is not a neutral party in biblical texts. According to Isaiah 10, Assyria represents a country used by YHWH

to punish Israel and Judah for turning their backs on YHWH. Assyria, especially represented by its king, did not know when to stop exacting YHWH’s judgment. Rather, the rapacious appetite of this country’s king kept expanding its own power in hopes of subjugating the entire region to its own will. In the logic of Nahum, whatever mandate Assyria had at one point from YHWH had long since been forfeited because of its own brutal treatment of others. In the logic of Nahum within the Book of the Twelve, Assyria represents a formidable foe that Judah could not defeat. YHWH could, and did, stop the Assyrian expansion by sending yet another nation (or coalition) against it.

Historically, the celebration of Nineveh’s demise has the events of 612 BCE in view, but theologically, Nahum conveys at least three significant points. First, no power is beyond the reach of YHWH. While Assyria thinks its numbers provide it unassailable strength (3:15–16; see also 1:12), the message of Nahum anticipates the failure of that strength when facing YHWH. Assyria is no match for the power of YHWH.

Second, Nahum 2–3 depicts YHWH as the one who brings the long Assyrian period of oppression to an end. The last king mentioned in Micah (Hezekiah) already suffered under Assyrian hegemony by the time he died around 696 BCE. Nahum provides a sense of hope that the fall of Assyria in 612 represents good news for Judah (see Nah 1:15 [MT 2:1]) since only YHWH would be powerful enough to accomplish Nineveh’s downfall. In the Book of the Twelve, Nahum assumes this period of Assyrian brutality has

come to an end. The theophany at the beginning of Nahum already placed this action in a cosmic context. YHWH arrives to set the world in order once more.

Third, YHWH's punishment of Assyria does not mean Judah escapes its own punishment for turning away from YHWH. When the next writing, Habakkuk, begins, it will focus on the unchanged behavior of Judah. It is clear that the accusations from Micah 6 still hold sway for Judah in Habakkuk. This continuing story in the Book of the Twelve is what keeps Nahum from becoming a xenophobic rant. Assyria is not singled out for capricious acts of judgment, nor is it left free to subjugate the world through intimidation and brutality. God will not leave the guilty unpunished (hence the allusions to Exod 34:6-7 in Joel 3:21 [MT 4:21] and Nah 1:2-3) even though God's *compassion* toward Nineveh has also been a subject of discussion in the Book of the Twelve (see Jonah 4:2 and *its* use of Exod 34:6-7).

NOTES

1. Julia Myers O'Brien, *Nahum* (Readings; London: Sheffield, 2002) 59.
2. For a discussion of these elements, see W. Eugene March, "Prophecy," in *Old Testament Form Criticism* (ed. John H. Hayes; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974) 164–65.
3. Erhard Gerstenberger, "The Woe Oracle of the Prophets," *JBL* 81 (1962): 253.
4. Aloysius Fitzgerald, "The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the OT," *CBQ* 34 (1972): 403–16; John J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *RB* 92 (1985): 557–69; Bernard Batto, W. Hallo, and Lawson Younger, eds., *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (Scripture in Context 4; Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1991) 173–87.
5. See E. Kautzsch, GKC (trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) §147a, b.
6. For an exploration of the various interpretations of this text, see John R. Huddleston, "Nahum, Nineveh, and the Nile: The Description of Thebes in Nahum 3:8-9," *JNES* 62 (2003): 97–110.
7. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 56–66 (AB 19B; New York: Doubleday, 2003) 314.
8. For a summary of the complicated relationship between Assyria and Egypt during the seventh century, see Erik Hornung, *History of Ancient Egypt: An Introduction* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 131–39.
9. See Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, §122q, r.

10. See James D. Nogalski, "Joel as Literary Anchor to the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney; Symposium 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) 91–109; "Intertextuality and the Twelve," in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts* (ed. James W. Watts and Paul House; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996) 113–16; and "Recurring Theological Motifs in the Book of the Twelve," *Int* 61 (2007): 125–36.

11. See the insightful analysis of O'Brien, *Nahum*, 66–72.

12. See James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, 146–50.

13. See Julia M. O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

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HABAKKUK

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Dating the Prophet, the Source Material, and the Book

Nothing is known of Habakkuk outside the prophetic writing associated with him. Neither of the two superscriptions bearing his name provides a father's name, a ruling king, or a hometown that would provide insight into early traditions about the prophet. [Habakkuk in Jewish Tradition] Given that the prophet's name is a foreign word for a houseplant, it is possible but not provable that the person Habakkuk could have been born in Babylon during the exile (see discussion of 1:1). The Greek addition to Daniel (also known as Bel and the Dragon) mentions Habakkuk, but the legendary nature of that text and its late composition make it unreliable as a historical source.¹ [Habakkuk and Daniel]

Any biographical information must thus be deduced from the book, but this task is complicated because of the composite nature of the source material. Two things appear clear, but they suggest a complex picture: Habakkuk was considered a prophet, and some of the source material reflects close connections to the temple cult. First, both superscriptions (1:1; 3:1) refer to Habakkuk as a prophet; this is one of only three prophetic books naming prophets as such in their superscriptions. Both of the others (Haggai, Zechariah) are also found in the Book of the Twelve. However, assuming these superscriptions represent older traditions about the author, the model of the prophet here almost certainly must be a prophet who was closely associated with the cult. Second, the core material of Habakkuk reflects a strong tendency toward the use of cultic forms and formulations alongside those more traditionally associated with prophets. The complaint material sounds much like complaints in the Psalter (Hab 1:2-4, 12-14). The prophet's watchpost probably refers to a spot in the temple (see 2:1). The theophany of Habakkuk 3 shows unmistakable signs of cultic transmission, in all likelihood during the Persian period. Thus, the prophet is well versed in things related to the cult. Nevertheless, the speaker also does things typical of a prophet: he receives a "vision" (2:2-5), he speaks for YHWH

Habakkuk in Jewish Tradition



Traditions concerning Habakkuk in Jewish tradition converge around three topics: the date of the prophet, the role of Habakkuk in Bel and the Dragon; and confrontational theodicy. First, the date of Habakkuk is confused. On the one hand, several traditions date the prophet to the reign of Manasseh (696–641 BCE). However, since Manasseh's reign lasted most of the seventh century, the question of when the prophet worked during Manasseh's reign goes in two different directions. Some traditions assume that the prophet Habakkuk can be treated as contemporary with eighth-century prophets like Isaiah and Micah. Since several of these traditions about Habakkuk also involve Manasseh's martyring of Isaiah, this line of dating presumes Habakkuk was active when Manasseh began his reign. A second line of dating places the prophet closer to the end of the seventh century and into the sixth century, and associates Habakkuk with the prophet Daniel (see below). Both lines of tradition may have to do with Habakkuk's reference to the rise of Babylon. Those dating Isaiah to the eighth century can point to the story of the Babylonian delegation's visit to Hezekiah in the aftermath of Sennacherib's siege (2 Kgs 20:12-19; Isa 39:1-8). The second line of tradition assumes Habakkuk lived closer to the time of the Babylonian overthrow of Assyria (612 BCE), after which Babylon became a major power in the region. A few rabbinic texts date Habakkuk to the ninth century because they associate the prophet with the Shunamite woman's son in the time of Elisha (2 Kgs 4:16). These texts make this association because of the play on the Hebrew root *hbg* (meaning "to embrace") when anticipating the birth of the child in that narrative.

The second recurring topic concerns rabbinic texts that elaborate on traditions found in Bel and the Dragon, the late expansion of Daniel traditions extant mainly in Greek that appears as Dan 14 in the Septuagint. In this interpretive story of Daniel in the lion's den, Habakkuk is

miraculously transported from Judah to Babylon in order to bring food to Daniel in the lion's den. Habakkuk had been cooking stew to give the harvesters when he was approached by an angel, who then commanded Habakkuk to take the stew to Daniel in Babylon. When Habakkuk demurred, saying he had never been to Babylon, the angel grabbed him by the hair and carried him to Babylon, whereupon Habakkuk commanded Daniel to eat the food God had sent him. Daniel ate and Habakkuk was returned to Judah by the angel. The rabbinic stories elaborate greatly on how the enemies of Daniel were punished in ways that go well beyond the narrative of Bel and the Dragon (see Ginzberg, 4:346–48, and the related footnotes on 6:432). No reason is provided for Habakkuk's selection in this narrative.

Regarding the third thematic topic in rabbinic tradition, at least two texts demonstrate some level of discomfort with the powerful confrontation of YHWH by the prophet. In the first (*Tehillim* 90:385), one finds a list of four persons (Habakkuk, along with Moses, David, and Jeremiah), who take their prayers too far and address God inappropriately, offending the sense of piety of later generations. Undoubtedly, these four appear because of reflections concerning biblical texts: Moses challenges God in the aftermath of the golden calf; David is associated with numerous complaint songs in Psalms that challenge God; Jeremiah's "confessions" challenge God directly; and Habakkuk's reflection on the prosperity of the wicked (1:2-4, 12-13) and his demand for a divine response to the problem (2:1). The second text (*Ta'anit* 23a) elaborates on how Habakkuk challenged God by drawing a circle and refusing to leave until God responded.

See Louis Ginzberg, ed., *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998) 6:345–46, footnote 10; and Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. David W. Cotter, 2 vols. (Berit Olam; Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 454.

(2:6-20), recounts the appearance of God (3:2-7, 8-15), and intercedes on behalf of the people (3:2).

Increasingly, questions have been raised about dating Habakkuk, as scholars have tried to distinguish the dates of the sources used to create the book from the date these sources were combined to form the book. Difficulties in dating have been raised in recent discussions because the elements pertinent to dating the material point in different directions. The most obvious historical reference appears

in Habakkuk 1:6, where YHWH announces his intention of sending the Chaldeans (=the Babylonians) against Judah and other nations. Only with the downfall of Nineveh in 612 did Babylon become a significant player in Palestine, but by the end of the battle of Carchemish in 605, Babylon effectively controlled the region. It conquered Jerusalem in 598 (exiling much of its leadership) and again in 587 (when the city and temple were demolished). Seen in this light, the time of prophet appears at first glance to fall into a rather narrow period. The announcement of an *impending* attack on Judah and the nations makes the most sense after 612 and prior to 605, or at least prior to 598. This announcement certainly evokes the reader's memories of these times.

However, the Babylonian commentary (1:5-11, 15-17) appears to belong to a later hand than the underlying prophetic complaint. Or, to phrase it another way, the Babylonian material appears to reflect a two-pronged agenda: to identify the means by which YHWH would punish Judah (sending the Babylonians) and to affirm that Babylon's power would be fleeting. One sees this agenda in YHWH's response to the prophet's complaint in chapter 1, in redactional expansions to some of the woe oracles, and in the prophet's response to the theophany in chapter 3. To be sure, the enemy is only named once (1:6), but few doubt that the subsequent material describing one who conquers other nations refers to the Babylonians.

Once one sets aside this Babylonian commentary, evidence for a late seventh-century date for the underlying material is harder to fix. Certainly, the temple is portrayed as a functioning entity (eliminating the exile), but the accusations are formulated so generally that they could reflect preexilic or postexilic settings.² However, other considerations point toward a Persian period date for the underlying source material. At least four such reasons can be mentioned.

Habakkuk and Daniel

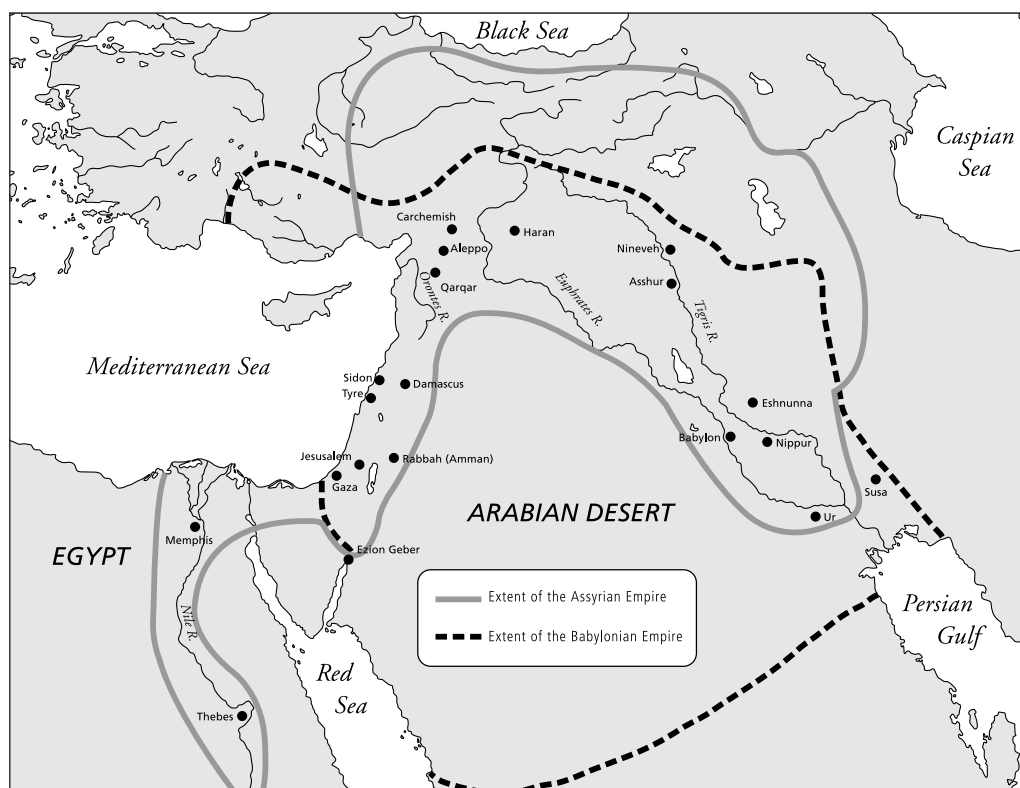


The Greek ending to Daniel contains a story of Daniel's refusal to worship either an idol named Bel or a dragon. As a result, the new king Cyrus of Persia throws Daniel into a lion's den for six days. Then an angel is dispatched to Habakkuk:

³³Now the prophet Habakkuk was in Judea; he had made a stew and had broken bread into a bowl, and was going into the field to take it to the reapers. ³⁴But the angel of the Lord said to Habakkuk, "Take the food that you have to Babylon, to Daniel, in the lions' den." ³⁵Habakkuk said, "Sir, I have never seen Babylon, and I know nothing about the den." ³⁶Then the angel of the Lord took him by the crown of his head and carried him by his hair; with the speed of the wind he set him down in Babylon, right over the den. ³⁷Then Habakkuk shouted, "Daniel, Daniel! Take the food that God has sent you." ³⁸Daniel said, "You have remembered me, O God, and have not forsaken those who love you." ³⁹So Daniel got up and ate. And the angel of God immediately returned Habakkuk to his own place.

Afterward, King Cyrus begins to worship Daniel's God.

Assyrian and Babylonian Empires



The Babylonian empire never extended as far as the Assyrian empire (as illustrated by the map above), but it nevertheless proved formidable as a regional power.

The lighter solid lines represent the approximate area controlled by Assyria while the dotted lines indicate Babylonian-controlled territory. Babylon never conquered Egypt, but it did move farther west along the Mediterranean Sea coast.

First, the superscription and subscription of Habakkuk 3 share features with superscriptions prominent in books 1–3 of the Psalter (see [\[Habakkuk 3 and Cultic Transmission\]](#) at the beginning of Hab 3). So too, the use of *selâ* (Hab 3:3, 9, 13) points to the same cultic circles. Books 1–3 of the Psalter (Pss 1–89) were most likely edited together in the Persian period.³ The incorporation of Habakkuk 3, which has the characteristics of an independent piece, likely did not happen until this cultic material was added.

Second, in at least one case, the complaint contains intertextual allusions to the Priestly creation story (see the commentary to Hab 1:14), which certainly make better sense in the Persian period than in pre-exilic times. While much reconsideration of the existence and date of the Pentateuchal sources has taken place, a strong consensus among Pentateuchal scholars is that the Priestly material comes from the late exilic or early postexilic period.

Third, a similar style of incorporating a theophanic hymn that evidences cultic overtones was noted with the front end of Nahum. As noted in the commentary on Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1), the connecting material there involves textual interplay with Deutero-Isaiah, a Persian period text. Both of these theophanies also speak in general terms about the nations, while their connecting contexts focus on a specific regional power—Assyria in Nahum and Babylon in Habakkuk.

Fourth, thematically, the problem of theodicy around which the complaints revolve is more readily placed after Jerusalem's destruction than before. Other writings from the Persian period (like Job and certain psalms) raise these issues to protest facile solutions to the question of the prosperity of the wicked. However, the functioning temple presumed in this core material eliminates the sixth century prior to the temple's reconstruction (520–515).

For these reasons, one must seriously entertain the possibility that Habakkuk is a prophetic writing *compiled* during the Persian period as a theological *reflection on* the end of the seventh century rather than the words of a seventh-century prophet. This model explains more of the literary tensions in Habakkuk than a seventh-century date: specifically, the abrupt interruptions of the complaints with material describing the Babylonians and the strong indications of the independent transmission of Habakkuk 3 (a separate superscription, a subscription, and the use of *selâ*). For more detail about the relationship of the core material to the expansions, see the discussion of the literary unit of the material below.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity

Habakkuk represents a composite unity whose logic was created by weaving editorial material into preexisting contexts. In other words, the unifying features of Habakkuk tend to interrupt the flow of more homogenous material (complaints, woe oracles, and theophanic hymnody), yet these interruptions (e.g., 1:5–11, 15–17) apply the more general material by evoking images of Babylonian domination. The core material of Habakkuk 1–2 currently presents two complaints that were likely a single complaint originally (1:2–4, 12–14), a vision report (2:1–5), and a series of woe oracles (2:6–20*), separated and woven together by material that comments on the ferocity of Babylon (1:6–11, 15–17; 2:8, 12–14, 17).

Form critically, two complaint sections (1:2-4, 12-14) confront YHWH with an unjust situation. Several observations suggest that this material originally constituted a single complaint, though the Babylonian oracle (1:6-11) now interrupts that complaint. The rhetorical question that begins 1:12 makes good sense as a continuation of the prophet's challenge to YHWH using an interrogative style. The basic thrust of both passages concerns the same issue: the prospering of the wicked over the righteous. Both sections demonstrate a concern for the inactivity of YHWH and a rather confrontational style. Both sections also expect a response from YHWH that could originally have continued in 2:1, where the prophet narrates his decision to await that response. Habakkuk 2:4-5 relays a vision to the community, and unlike the oracular response of 1:6-11, Habakkuk 2:4-5 relates specifically to the issue raised in the complaint proper. The vision report reiterates a more traditional response to the questions raised by the speaker of the complaint. Namely, the vision reaffirms the fundamental principle that the wicked will be punished, even if—from a human perspective—there is a delay in this punishment. This affirmation leads to a series of woe oracles that condemn the behavior of the wicked in order to encourage the righteous. Thus, both the first and second complaint sections are interrupted by material interpreting the wicked as Babylon (1:6-11, 15-17). Further, the vision report of 2:1-5 is thematically more consistent with the complaints by themselves.

Following the two complaint sections and the vision report, the third section of core material in Habakkuk consists of the five woe oracles (2:6b-8; 9-11, 12-14, 15-17, 18-19). The bulk of this material confronts ethical or religious concerns about what people in Judah are doing, but other portions apply these charges to the Babylonians. The first woe oracle condemns those who make loans on borrowed money, but the application (2:8) takes on a political tone evoking the enemy described in 1:6-11, 15-17. The second oracle (2:9-11) uses the metaphor of a wealthy homeowner who builds to show off his wealth, but whose own exorbitant house will do him in. Essentially a charge against pomposity and greed, the final form of this oracle also contains a political barb that subtly challenges Babylonian hegemony. The third oracle (2:12-14) challenges one who uses brute force to remain in power, and the context makes application to Babylon easy. The fourth woe oracle

(2:15-17) denounces drunken debauchery, but the images rely on other texts to evoke Babylonian aggression. The fifth woe oracle (2:16-18) condemns idolatry for its absurdity, reminding the reader of the description of Babylon worshiping itself as its own god (1:15-16). The application in this context never mentions Babylon by name after 1:6, but assumes Babylon as antecedent. This association draws upon the political nature of the condemnations or the politicized reapplication of the individual woe oracles.

The source blocks of Habakkuk 1–2 (the complaints, the vision report, and the collection of woe oracles) are thus connected editorially by material announcing YHWH's intention to punish Judah by sending Babylon (1:6), by recounting the power of Babylon (1:6-11, 15-17), and by political application of the woes to the wicked one. Likely, the complaints and the vision report were originally a single composition dealing with the problem of theodicy (the prosperity of the wicked), which was later transformed by the addition of the Babylonian commentary.

The composite theophany that concludes the book also shows signs of independent transmission before being attached to Habakkuk. Indicators of a cultic setting for Habakkuk 3 are discussed in the commentary on 3:1. Reference to the cultic notes and the corporate "I" in 3:14 suggest the chapter was transmitted among the cult singer guilds of the Persian period. The combination of two different tradition source blocks (3:3-7, 8-15) likely predates the theophany's incorporation into Habakkuk. In two places, the theophany may have been adapted slightly for inclusion into Habakkuk: the name of "Habakkuk, *the prophet*" and (at least) portions of 3:17, in which echoes of Joel's fertility imagery could have been inserted into the Habakkuk context.

The designation of Habakkuk 3 as a "prayer" (3:1) likely presumes the petition of 3:2 ("in wrath, remember mercy"), which in turn matches the trembling response to the theophany (3:16, 18-19) but differs from the corporate "I" of 3:14. This theophany report served the compilers well, needing little adaptation to accomplish the intended purpose of its inclusion: to pronounce YHWH's ultimate victory over the enemy after that enemy has devastated the land.

By assuming from 1:6 that Babylon is the enemy nation in the theophany, one ascertains how the theophany fits with other descriptions of Babylon in Habakkuk. The theophany reflects the

same two motifs associated with the other Babylon texts in Habakkuk: Babylon will attack Judah as punishment from YHWH (hence, the fear motif of 3:16-17), but YHWH will ultimately punish Babylon and the nations (note the killing of the attacker in 3:14 and the rejoicing in 3:18-19). In this sense, the final form of Habakkuk, artfully compiled from preexisting sources, has been designed to follow Nahum and to anticipate Zephaniah for the Book of the Twelve.

Habakkuk in the Book of the Twelve

Position and content are the keys to interpreting Habakkuk in the Book of the Twelve. The position of Habakkuk between Nahum and Zephaniah shows a clear logic of placement. Nahum describes the downfall of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, which was defeated by Babylon in 612 BCE. According to its superscription, Zephaniah is set in the reign of Josiah (639–608). It was during Josiah's reign that Babylon defeated Assyria and began to stake its claim to the lands held by Assyria west of the Euphrates. In the aftermath of Assyria's destruction, Judah, led by Josiah, began to assert its own political independence, which ultimately led to Josiah's death. Josiah was likely caught up in the political intrigue between Babylon and Egypt, who were both vying for control of the region between Nineveh's destruction (612 BCE) and Babylon's defeat of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish (605 BCE),⁴ and he met his death trying to obstruct an Egyptian attempt to aid Assyria against Babylon (2 Kgs 23:29-30). At any rate, Habakkuk lays the groundwork literarily and theologically for reading Zephaniah. Habakkuk's message of the rise of Babylon as the work of YHWH continues the story of the destroyer of Nineveh in Nahum 3 (i.e., Babylon). In turn, this destroyer now threatens Judah, and this is YHWH's doing. The essential message of Zephaniah 1–2 anticipates the rapidly approaching destruction of Jerusalem as a day of YHWH. This theme, however, is introduced by the prophet's response in Habakkuk 3:16. In short, Habakkuk continues where Nahum 3 leaves off and thematically anticipates Zephaniah.

The Babylonian commentary emphasizes Babylon's rise as YHWH's work. It evokes memories of the end of the seventh century and anticipates Jerusalem's destruction as the work of YHWH. It also underscores the ferocity of the Babylonian army.

Four additional indicators suggest Habakkuk was compiled in awareness of its position within the Book of the Twelve: the language of Amos 6:14 (in 1:5); locust imagery (1:9); the command to be silent before YHWH (2:20); and the expectation of infertility (3:17). First, the language of Amos 6:14 for YHWH's raising of Assyria is repeated in Habakkuk 1:5 for the raising of Babylon as the instrument by which injustice will be punished. This language sets up parallel roles for Assyria and Babylon that help explain the assumptions of the Book of the Twelve. In this role, Assyria is portrayed as an instrument of punishment against Israel and Judah in Amos 6:14 (note the Zion/Samaria parallel Amos 6:1). Then, Micah threatens Jerusalem with destruction if it does not learn from Samaria's example, which informed readers knew was destroyed by Assyria. Next, Habakkuk prepares the reader for the arrival of Babylon and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, with the latter being explored more fully in the beginning of Zephaniah.

Second, the locust imagery in Habakkuk not only echoes the language used of enemy invaders in Joel 1:4 and 2:25 but also fits the description of the attacking army in Joel 2:1-11. While the formulation of the Babylonian army in Habakkuk does not use the specific terms for locusts found in Joel, it does draw on a locust metaphor by speaking of "the horde of their faces moving forward" (Hab 1:9). In this respect, the image looks similar to the battle march of the cosmic army in Joel 2:7-9.

Third, the command for silence before YHWH plays an important role in the Book of the Twelve, where five of the seven instances of this interjection *has* in the Hebrew Bible appear (Judg 3:19; Neh 8:11; Amos 6:10; 8:3; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:13 [MT 2:17]). Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; and Zechariah 2:13 exhibit some form of the command "silence before YHWH." These texts relate to the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7) or to YHWH's decision to punish the nations who have furthered Judah's disaster (Zech 2:13 [MT 2:17]). These three texts also play significant roles in the structure of their respective writings, where they conclude major units (Hab 2:20; Zech 2:13 [MT 2:17]) or begin a major thematic section of the book (Zeph 1:7). In essence, then, this command connotes the beginning and end of the focus on Jerusalem's destruction in the Book of the Twelve.

Fourth, Habakkuk 3:17 reprises the threat of infertility of the land—a prominent theme in Hosea (for Israel) and Joel (for Judah) when anticipating the destruction of Jerusalem as a day of YHWH, though here it is expressed as a “day of calamity” (see Obad 12, 14).⁵ Habakkuk 3:16 speaks of a day of calamity, in parallel with “the people who will attack us.” This “day” leads to the land’s infertility (3:17). This day cannot be avoided, merely endured. The hope is for the time after the day of calamity.

The Message of Habakkuk

The message of Habakkuk revolves around two themes: theodicy and theophany (see the discussion of recurring motifs in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve). The theodicy problem in Habakkuk begins as a protest but quickly moves to reaffirm traditional views. The Habakkuk theodicy is neither as brash nor as ambiguous as that of Jeremiah and Job. The prophetic figure in Habakkuk returns rather quickly to the conviction that the answer to the problem of injustice is essentially to wait and trust that YHWH knows best. The prophet is convinced that YHWH’s action is the only way forward. The prophet complains to YHWH that injustice and violence have permeated the land. When YHWH decides to punish Judah using Babylon as the attacking army (1:6-11), the prophet’s complaint continues (1:12-14, 15-17), but now essentially complains that two wrongs do not make a right. The prophet demands to know whether the wicked (Babylon) will continually overthrow nations without limits. The prophet takes his position to await a response from YHWH to his complaint (2:1), but that response (2:4-5) only reframes the prophet’s own understanding by essentially stating that the wicked will all be punished eventually. The woe oracles extend and concretize this message as they convey the idea that the wicked in Judah and Babylon will suffer punishment from YHWH for their actions. This section concludes with the call for silence before YHWH in his temple, which effectively eliminates the possibility of any counter-argument from the prophet.

The theophany of Habakkuk 3 underscores the power of YHWH over creation and the events of history. By its placement, the final section (Hab 3:1-19) reinforces the prophet’s response to the problems posed by the theodicy complaints, even though it was

not originally written with that function in mind. Three elements of the theophany extend the prophet's response.

(1) The call for mercy in the midst of wrath (3:2) assumes the two stages of judgment portrayed by Habakkuk 1–2. This petition must be contextually interpreted to mean that the wrath of YHWH will come against Judah, but that the prophet hopes only for a tempering of that wrath. In the context, this hope implies that the prophet hopes a remnant will survive and that YHWH's destruction of the attacking army will stop the total annihilation of YHWH's people.

(2) Since the focus of the theophany is on the defeat of the wicked, one must admit that the emphasis appears to be on Babylon's ultimate destruction, but its defeat is only meaningful if a faithful group remains to pick up the pieces. The blending of two theophany reports articulates YHWH's extended march (3:3-7) to defeat Babylon (3:8-15) after Babylon invades the land.

(3) Armed with the terrifying prospects of this vision, the prophet reiterates a response similar to the message of the vision in 2:4-5. He will wait for the enemy to invade (to punish the wicked in Judah), and he will rejoice in YHWH's deliverance, even though he knows the time between YHWH's punishment and YHWH's deliverance will present tremendous hardships when the land will become incapable of producing the things needed to survive.

In essence, one sees in Habakkuk the presentation of a prophet to whom YHWH reveals Babylon's impending defeat of Judah. Thus, Habakkuk is not far removed from the understanding of the prophetic role of Amos 3:7: "Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets." To be sure, this knowledge creates a terrible burden (3:16) but also a degree of comfort in knowing that God's expectations for justice (*mišpat*) and instruction (*tôrâ*) remain in effect. In this knowledge, the prophet both trembles and rejoices.

NOTES

1. See discussion of Hab 1:1 for details.

2. Tensions between the poor, the *'am ha-aretz* (a group of farmers slightly better off economically), the wealthy, and the royalty were an issue in the time of Amos (8th C.) through the Persian period and beyond. See Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the End of the*

Monarchy (trans. John Bowden; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 165–67, 201–203, 495–97).

3. See Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen: Eine Einführung* (Kohlhammer Urban-Taschenbücher 382; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer) 24–35, 103–105; Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 207–14; James D. Nogalski, “From Psalm to Psalms to Psalter,” in *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate* (ed. H. Wayne Ballard, Jr., and W. Dennis Tucker, Jr.; Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2000) 37–54.

4. For recent studies on the complex social situation, the allied parties and their antagonists, see Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 1:197–232.

5. The NRSV does not translate the phrase *yōm šārâ* consistently. In Obad 12 and 14, it translates this phrase “day of misfortune” because it translates another phrase as “day of calamity” in Obad 13. Nevertheless, both phrases in Obad 12–14, along with others, are essentially synonymous with Jerusalem’s destruction, as is the case with Hab 3:16.

OUTLINE OF HABAKKUK

- I. Habakkuk 1:1: The First Superscription
- II. Habakkuk 1:2–4: A Complaint about Judah’s Society
- III. Habakkuk 1:5–11: YHWH’s Response—I Will Send Babylon
- IV. Habakkuk 1:12–17: The Prophet’s Complaint Continued
- V. Habakkuk 2:1–20: Confrontation and Response
 - A. 2:1–5: Vision Report Narrative
 - B. 2:6–20: Five Woe Oracles
- VI. Habakkuk 3:1: The Second Superscription
- VII. Habakkuk 3:2–7: Prayer and Theophany Report
- VIII. Habakkuk 3:8–15: Theophany of Divine Victory
- IX. Habakkuk 3:16–19: A Prophet Responds

THEODICY AND JUDGMENT

Habakkuk 1:1–2:20

COMMENTARY

The first two chapters of Habakkuk offer interesting insights into the artistry of the compilation process involved in piecing together prophetic writings. These chapters almost certainly consist of composite materials—a weaving together of three distinct thematic threads, at least two of which constitute preexisting materials. These composite materials include a prophetic complaint dealing with the prosperity of the wicked (1:2-4, 12-14; 2:1-5a); a Babylonian commentary (1:5-11, 15-17; 2:5b, 8, 16b-17); and a collection of five woe oracles (2:6-19) with a conclusion to the whole (2:20). The artful interweaving of this material, especially in the transitions and the Babylonian commentary, often makes it difficult to determine which of these pieces existed independently and which were composed for their current locations.

The First Superscription, 1:1

The first superscription in Habakkuk (Hab 1:1) functions as a title with no syntactical connections to the subsequent units: “The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.” The word *maššā*’ is translated variously as “oracle” (NRSV, NIV), burden (KJV, NKJV), prophecy (CJB), or pronouncement (TNK). The reasons for the variety have to do with the etymology and the function of the term. [Oracle or Burden] At any rate, it is probably accurate to say that the word conveys something more than a neutral term like “oracle” can carry in English. Since what follows conveys judgment on Judah at the hands of Babylon, “burden” would not be too strong a term.

The name Habakkuk is generally thought to derive from the Akkadian name for a particular houseplant, *habaqququ*. This name carries no theological significance, so it likely represents a name given a child at birth. The foreign word may suggest a time after Judah’s

Oracle or Burden

ΑΩ The word *maššā'* derives from the Hebrew root *nāšā'*, which means to lift up or carry. Certain narrative texts use the word *maššā'* in this sense, when they describe something that must be physically lifted as a load to be carried (Num 4:15, 47; 2 Kgs 5:17; 8:9; 2 Chr 35:3; Neh 13:15; Isa 46:1,2; Jer 17:21, 22, 24). Other texts extend this idea metaphorically so that what is “carried” is not something physical but a responsibility, a burden to bear (Num 11:11) or to carry through life (Prov 31:1). By contrast, in prophetic texts *maššā'* appears frequently in superscriptions to prophetic messages, which are almost always negative, either about YHWH’s people or foreign nations (Isa 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1). Moreover, there are texts

that presume the content of a prophetic speech is *maššā'* (2 Kgs 9:25; Ezek 12:10). Translations of *maššā'* as “oracle” depend on this type of *maššā'* text. Jer 23 preserves a strenuous polemical debate about the meaning of this phrase in the context of oral pronouncements (23:33, 34, 38). In this passage, those pronouncing the *maššā'* become the burden and will be punished. For this reason, one may understand the translation “burden” as opposed to the more neutral “oracle” as a metaphorical rendering of the idea of *maššā'*. The unusual use of the verb “to envision” with *maššā'* in Hab 1:1 suggests that the debates behind Jer 23, while not the primary issue here, nevertheless meant that when the prophet envisions the *maššā'*, it is understood as a burden.

elite are exiled to Babylon. The naming of a child with a foreign name could have been possible for someone living in Judah at the end of the seventh century, but foreign names in Judah are not particularly common in this time. No traditions exist, though, identifying Habakkuk as a child of the exile. (See [Habakkuk in Jewish Tradition].) Likely, the literary construction of the writing anticipates the Babylonian invasion (see discussion of 1:5-11, 15-17).

A Complaint about Judah’s Society, 1:2-4

Habakkuk 1:2-4 bears a striking similarity to complaints one finds in the Psalter that follow a stylized pattern. In contrast to laments (where disaster has already occurred) and thanksgiving songs (where deliverance has already happened), speakers in complaints address YHWH in the midst of a crisis. The crisis in these verses is the state of Judah’s society, which the prophet bemoans. The description of society concerns the prophet both for what is present and what is lacking. The prophet confronts YHWH’s lack of attention to violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, and contention. It is not just that these elements are present, but the fact that YHWH has done nothing about them that disturbs the speaker. Ironically, the speaker’s questions imply that while YHWH may not be bothered by violence and injustice, the speaker is. Instruction (*tôrâ*) and justice (*mišpat*) are lacking, and the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer.

For modern readers, what appears to be the prophetic figure’s indignation at the situation leads to a bold confrontation of

YHWH that is on a par with Job and the Confessions of Jeremiah. [Jeremiah's Confessions] The idea of the speaker's exasperation may be overstated, however, since the genre of complaint is well attested. Even the plaintive cry, "How long?" represents a fairly common expression in complaint songs and other psalms (Pss 4:3; 6:4; 13:1, 3; 35:17; 62:4; 74:10; 79:5; 80:5; 82:2; 90:13; 94:3; 119:8). This English phrase reflects four recurring Hebrew expressions. The one in Habakkuk 1:2 appears three times in the Psalter (13:1, 3; 62:4). However, even with the formulaic quality of the expression, one should not overlook its implications when placed in the mouth of a prophetic figure. The phrase implies that the current crisis had already lasted for some time. This implied lengthy duration fits the function of Habakkuk in the Book of the Twelve very well.

From the perspective of the Book of the Twelve, Judah's society at the rise of Babylon's power looks like the analysis of Judean society in Micah 7:1-6. Only when one moves to Habakkuk 1:5-11 does the reader learn information that conveys a setting from which to interpret the complaint of 1:2-4. YHWH's response announces the impending arrival of the Chaldeans (another name for the Babylonians, see 1:6). Hence, Habakkuk 1:2-4 is intended to be read as coming from a time close to the rise of the Babylonian entry into Judah. The logic of Habakkuk's placement thus fits well after Nahum (which assumes the imminent destruction of Assyria by Babylon). In literary and historical terms, this placement means the reader would most likely have associated Habakkuk 1:2-4 with the time between Nineveh's destruction in 612 BCE and the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE, when Babylonian control over Judah was firmly established.

The prophet's boldness diminishes by the end of Habakkuk. After the initial cry in 1:2, the prophet's complaint changes to expressions of concern over the enemy attack until he is effectively silenced by YHWH's response to be quiet (2:20). Much like Job, when the prophet speaks in Habakkuk 3, he does not confront YHWH with the same bravado as at the beginning. In chapter 3, the prophet utters an appeal for mercy (3:2), recounts his terror at the coming disaster (3:7), and expresses resignation that the punishment must come (3:16-18) before concluding with an affirmation of YHWH's ultimate deliverance (3:19).

Jeremiah's Confessions



Jeremiah's confessions are a series of five texts in Jeremiah (Jer 11:18–12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18) that are linked together by their confrontational character as the prophet challenges YHWH to act on the prophet's behalf, combined with a response from YHWH.

Two thematic threads run through the core of Habakkuk 1–2: upending the social order and God’s use of Babylon to punish Judah. This topic explores God’s mastery over that which no one else can control, namely the Babylonians. As part of this theme, one finds extensive descriptions of the power of Babylon, though these descriptions ultimately demonstrate YHWH’s power because YHWH controls Babylon’s fate.

YHWH’s Response: I Will Send Babylon, 1:5-11

Habakkuk 1:5-11 constitutes YHWH’s first response to the prophet’s questions. In the flow of Habakkuk, though, questions have been raised about its original connection to the preceding complaint. The speaker changes from the prophet (in 1:2-4) to YHWH (in 1:5-11). The subject of these verses consistently focuses on YHWH’s use of Babylon as a tool for punishing other nations. As part of the terrifying background, 1:5-11 portrays the brutality and power of Babylon as a nation that has no equal.

In Habakkuk 1:5, YHWH addresses a group, as indicated by the plural verbs. In this sense, the response is not an answer to the prophet only, but to the entire community. The speaker maintains that what is about to happen is unparalleled and will be difficult to comprehend.

The next verse narrates YHWH’s imminent use of the Chaldeans, another name for the Babylonians. The formulation in which YHWH pronounces the use of the Babylonians to punish others echoes the words of Amos 6:14. [*Amos 6:14 and Habakkuk 1:6*] In Amos 6:14, the identity of the “nation” is implied from the context as Assyria, while Habakkuk 1:6 specifies the Chaldeans. Synchronically, this repeated pronouncement means that the Book of the Twelve presents God as “raising up” both Assyria and Babylon to punish Israel and Judah. The theme of YHWH’s use of Assyria was developed at length in the transition from Micah to Nahum (see commentary). Habakkuk will now develop this theme for Babylon in a manner that does two things: (1) it underscores YHWH’s power to manipulate the most powerful of nations; and (2) it emphasizes the superior power of Babylon, in the process subtly underscoring YHWH’s power.

The description of the Babylonians dominates the remainder of 1:7-11. The description first focuses on both the respect and terror

Amos 6:14 and Habakkuk 1:6

ΑΩ From many of the English translations, one cannot see how similar these phrases are in Hebrew. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the formulations draw a parallel between YHWH's punishment of Israel and Judah with Assyria and a second wave of punishment from YHWH at the hands of Babylon.

Amos 6:14

For behold, I am about to raise a nation [=Assyria] against you, house of Israel, says the LORD God of hosts, and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hemath to the Wadi-Arabah.

Habakkuk 1:6

For behold, I am about to raise the Chaldeans [=Babylon], the fierce and hasty nation which traverses broad expanses of the earth to possess dwellings that do not belong to them.

The use of “behold” followed by a participle is a syntactical formulation that suggests an action in the imminent future (GK §116p). Note further the heightening of the power of Babylon in Habakkuk in comparison to Assyria in the Amos formulation. In Amos, Assyria will attack the house of Israel from the far north to the south. By contrast, Habakkuk's portrayal of the Babylonians threatens “the breadth of the earth,” not merely Israel and Judah.

the Babylonians generate. The phrase translated “dread and fear-some” accentuates the sheer magnitude of Babylon's power. Reference to Babylon creating its own justice and dignity conveys a polemical edge when read in the context of Old Testament texts. Justice belongs to YHWH, not to one's own exercise of power, as implied of Babylon in 1:7.

The word translated as “dignity” in the NRSV has a range of meanings (majestic, elevated, puffed up, awesome). It refers primarily to the proud demeanor of an object. There is, however, an element of respect—not mockery—in this term implied by the context. Thus, Babylon's reputation makes one tremble in both fear and admiration. Ironically, Habakkuk 3:16 portrays the prophet's final response to YHWH in rather similar terms. YHWH's power makes the prophet tremble as he contemplates the coming punishment as a manifestation of YHWH's power, first on Judah (3:17) but ultimately on Babylon as well (3:13-15).

Habakkuk 1:8-9 describes the military machine of Babylon. The speed of its horses and the multitude of its army swarming forward result in victories so complete that the captives they take are compared to pieces of sand. The next two verses portray the utter lack of fear on the part of Babylon as its military machine marches through the region. The Babylonians are portrayed as mocking the power and fortresses of other nations. They pass through each country like the wind. No one can stand up to their strength.

The end of this unit (1:11b), however, throws an unexpected twist into the description. Its ambiguity functions to further both the inevitability of Judah's destruction and the ultimate end of the Babylonian terror. The phrase is compact syntactically, leading to

several variations in English translations. The meaning of 1:11a presents a series of actions, and 1:11b appears to be an indirect accusation. The density of the syntax virtually requires one to add something to any translation to make sense of the dense formulations: “1:11a He will fly along *like* the wind and pass through *the land*, but he will *eventually* be held account accountable, 1:11b this one whose strength is his God.” What seems clear is that this verse opens the door to a major thrust of the message of the writing of Habakkuk as we now have it: God will not only use Babylon to punish Judah but will ultimately bring about Babylon’s defeat as well, punishing it for the evil it has perpetrated. While this brief allusion to the ultimate downfall of Babylon may not seem to offer much comfort to those facing the terror, it nevertheless plays an important theological role in the rhetoric of Habakkuk. YHWH’s justice, not Babylon’s, will ultimately prevail. Just as the placement of 1:5-11 assumes YHWH will bring the Babylonians into Judah, one must also recall that it does so because of Judah’s society in which justice and instruction (*tôrâ*) have been perverted. In the logic of the text, there is no innocent party. First, Judah will be punished, and then later Babylon. A similar idea can be found regarding the king of Assyria in Isaiah 10:5-15.

The Prophet’s Complaint Continued, 1:12-17

Habakkuk 1:12-17 represents the next unit. In its current location, the initial question in 1:12 functions as a prophetic response to 1:2-4+5-11. Originally, however, it continued 1:2-4 as part of the core complaint regarding the prosperity of the wicked. The material in 1:12-17 weaves together the two themes of the previous verses: the fate of the wicked and the description of Babylon’s brutality. In a real sense, the core motifs in 1:12-13 continue the complaint of 1:2-4 by raising the questions about the prosperity of the wicked. By contrast, this question is reinterpreted by 1:14-17 with an eye toward the Babylonian invaders as the wicked.

YHWH speaks in 1:5-11, but the speaker changes back to the prophet in 1:12. In its current position, Habakkuk 1:12 serves three primary functions: (1) to defer to YHWH’s wisdom; (2) to acknowledge the role of Babylon; and (3) to proclaim a desire that the righteous will survive. First, the verse acknowledges the role of Babylon by relying on YHWH’s enduring character. Employing a typical wisdom motif, it assumes that YHWH’s ancient existence

connects YHWH with the founding of the created order as well as the wisdom behind that order. By referring to God's enduring character, it assumes that YHWH's wisdom knows what humans do not know.

Second, two parallel phrases that end the verse demonstrate that the prophet has understood the message of 1:5-11 to mean that the Babylonians will punish Judah:

O LORD, you have placed them for judgment;
and, O Rock, you have established them for correction.

In these parallel expressions, one finds two vocatives (YHWH, Rock), two nearly synonymous verbs with third masculine singular collective suffixes (placed/established them), and two parallel objects (judgment, correction).¹ Readers must determine who is being corrected. For syntactical and contextual reasons, one must deduce that the unstated object of punishment is Judah, not Babylon. Contextually, the third masculine singular suffix on the verb has been a consistent, prominent reference to Babylon in each verse in 1:6-11. Yet those verses describe Babylon as inflicting pain on others, not as the object of judgment. Syntactically, the words "justice" and "correction" have a *lamed* preposition attached to the Hebrew words. The first phrase ("made" + *lamed*) appears with some regularity in Old Testament texts, and the phrase has the sense of "made him into" (e.g., Gen 27:37; 45:7-8; 46:3; Exod 2:14). For both these reasons, the most natural way to understand this line is to assume the prophet is essentially saying, "You, YHWH, have sent Babylon as judgment *upon Judah*," essentially repeating what YHWH himself said in 1:5.²

The third function of 1:12 is disputed. The MT reads, "We shall not die," but the Masoretic notes to this verse indicates that it is one of the eighteen passages that the Masoretes classified as "*tiqqune sopherim*," a phrase that means "scribal corrections." Clearly, this phrase creates difficulty. If one reads MT as a statement of principle, it runs contrary to any realistic understanding of the human condition. All humans will die. The Masoretic designation therefore suggests that scribes emended the first letter of the word "die" that originally read "you shall not die" (*tāmût*) rather than "we shall not die" (*nāmût*) in the MT. This tradition considered the statement as a reference to YHWH's enduring character that parallels the previous line. Such scribal change was possible,

and at least two English translations emend the text to follow it (NRSV, TNK). However, if one assumes that 1:12 is responding to the message of 1:5-11, one need not eliminate “we” in favor of “you” for the verse to make sense, as indicated by the fact that most of the English translations follow MT.³ The MT, as it stands, affirms the belief that YHWH will preserve the righteous in the face of the threat.

Similar to 1:12, Habakkuk 1:13 asks a question regarding YHWH’s character. Here, the rhetorical point of the prophet’s original complaint becomes clearer: If YHWH cannot abide evil, why does YHWH allow the wicked to oppress the righteous? The implications of this question are not benign. They represent a challenge to YHWH to act on behalf of the righteous, as noted by the continuation of the complaint in 1:14.

This second question leads to the accusation of 1:14 in which the speaker, using echoes of creation language, accuses YHWH of creating humanity and then leaving them without adequate leadership. This assessment of the human situation implies more than just an attitude of “woe is me,” but implies two avenues of critique. It challenges YHWH with cosmic language, and it implies a rejection of the current human leaders. [\[Protest Literature\]](#)

The fish of the sea and the creeping things (of the earth) allude to the fifth and sixth day of creation in the Priestly creation story. The rhetorical barb associated with this language is clear. The fish of the sea and the creeping things represent classes of creatures that are not human, over which humanity should have dominion. Taking this allusion to Genesis 1 seriously, the prophet’s critique becomes even more devastating. In Genesis 1:26, the fish of the sea and the creeping things constitute the first and last items in the list of those things over which humanity should have dominion. Habakkuk 1:14 not only compares humans to animals, however; this charge also short-circuits the hierarchy of creation. If humans are no better than the animals they are supposed to supervise, then humanity itself requires a ruler, but there is no ruler present according to the end of 1:14. The sarcasm drips from this charge. How can humanity fulfill its supervisory role in creation if it has no sense of right and wrong? In a very real sense, 1:14 illustrates the complaint of Habakkuk 1:4—*tôrâ* has become weak. Such a contemplative use of the Priestly creation account has implications for dating Habakkuk, namely making a preexilic date unlikely. [\[Dating the Source Material of Habakkuk\]](#)

Protest Literature



American culture has a long history of protest literature, but the variations are often quite different from one another. At their core, however, these songs can express many of the same themes one finds in the complaint of Hab 1:1-4, 12-14, specifically the underlying charges that violence destroys innocence or that leaders ignore social problems. Nevertheless, the form used to express these ideas often differs from Habakkuk's complaint in at least one crucial aspect. Most modern songs do not confront God directly. Consider the plaintive song of the sixties by Peter, Paul and Mary, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" It bemoans the loss of innocence by asking why children become soldiers, who then become casualties of war, but it does not mention God. A recent song by Conor Oberst and Bright Eyes takes on the leadership of the country directly in a song aptly titled "When the President Talks to God," questioning how God communicates with political leaders:

when the president talks to god
are the conversations brief or long?
does he ask to rape our womens' rights
or to send poor farm kids off to die?
will the president recommend an oil hike
when the president talks to god?

when the president talks to god
are the words he chooses hard or soft?
does he resolute all down the line?
is every issue black or white?
does what god say ever change his mind
when the president talks to god?

At issue here is not merely the existence of violence but the use of God as rationale in public policy making. In Habakkuk's complaint, the prophet cries to God because the prophet assumes God is the only power able to fight the forces of violence. Many, if not most, American protest songs frame the problem differently, explicitly or implicitly rejecting the notion that God would use violence and military power to pit one country against another. These different assumptions should invite persons of faith to reflect theologically on their own assumptions: When God is evoked by political leaders, why is God always on our side? When we see evil and violence in our world, what role does God play in our own thinking?

Peter, Paul and Mary, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" *Peter, Paul and Mary*, Warner Brothers, 1962.

Conor Oberst, "When the President Talks to God" Saddle Creek, 2005.

Habakkuk 1:15-17 changes the focus of the response from the prosperity of the wicked to the ferocity of the Babylonians. For the second time in Habakkuk, a complaint to YHWH concerning the upending of society (1:2-4, 12-13) is followed by the expectation of an enemy attack against numerous nations (1:5-11, 15-17). The first pronouncement of the enemy attack explicitly mentions Babylon (= the Chaldeans in 1:6), while the second descriptive passage assumes the reader knows the identity of the attacker.

Habakkuk 1:15 changes the focus to Babylonian power via

Dating the Source Material of Habakkuk



The statements of 1:13-14 strongly critique the society, but the paradigmatic nature of this critique offers a universally applicable statement that makes dating the original setting difficult.

Nevertheless, the fact that this critique reflects on the Priestly creation account suggests that dating even the core material of Habakkuk to the late seventh century is problematic. The wisdom-oriented and theological nature of the complaint suggests considerable *theological reflection* on the implications of the Priestly account. It is doubtful that this material was available for reflection prior to the exile. The fact that the king is not directly targeted would fit well with a setting of the late exilic period for the core material. However, once the Babylonian commentary is incorporated into the complaint and Habakkuk is placed before Zephaniah (whose setting is placed in the time of Josiah, see Zeph 1:1), then the critique against the lack of leadership does function implicitly as a negative evaluation of Judah's own kings. Once Habakkuk is assigned a seventh-century context (via the inclusion of the Babylonian commentary), then the societal breakdown cited in 1:2-4 leads to the inevitable conclusion that Judah's leaders have failed to maintain order.

thematic material associating YHWH's impending judgment of Judah. Hence, the subject changes from the failure of human leadership to the power of the approaching enemy. Verses 15-17 describe Babylon as a terrifying enemy, using brutal pictures, as did 1:7-11. Habakkuk 1:15-17 builds on the fish metaphor from 1:14 by portraying the enemy as a fisherman using hooks and a net to capture these fish (i.e., humanity). The fisherman who catches these fish believes the work is his own doing. Therefore, he worships his own implements (1:16). The speaker at the end of this Babylonian commentary section, however, weaves the subject back around to the complaint concerning the success of Babylon by asking, in essence, how long YHWH will allow the domination of this fisherman to threaten the nations of the world (1:17).

Confrontation and Response, 2:1-20

The literary transitions in Habakkuk 2 include the conclusion to the theodicy complaint (2:1-4), two transitional elements (2:5-6a, 20), and a collection of five woe oracles (2:6b-19). Because each of these sections shows signs of adaptation to the current context, one cannot determine a clear dividing point between these elements and Habakkuk 1. Any division would be arbitrary, being complicated by the fact that as they currently appear, the woe oracles have an introduction (2:5-6a) whose linguistic formulations depend on the preceding material to identify the antecedents of the pronouns and verbal subjects, even as it transitions to the woe oracles. The final verse of the chapter (2:20), whatever its original setting, currently functions as a conclusion both to the woe oracles (2:6-19) and to the prophetic complaint as a whole (1:2-2:5). In short, while literary tensions exist, the editorial cohesion of this material argues for a maintaining a clear sense of the whole. For heuristic reasons, the vision report narrative (2:1-5) and the woe oracles (2:6-20) will be treated in separate but interrelated sections.

Vision Report Narrative, 2:1-5

Habakkuk 2:1-5 continues the motif of the prophet's confrontation, depicting the prophet waiting for a more satisfactory response from YHWH. The subsection includes two reports: a report of the prophet's dissatisfaction with the previous response from YHWH

(2:1) and a report of the vision the prophet receives that reaffirms the wicked will be punished (2:2-5).

In 2:1, the prophet goes to the watchpost to await additional word from YHWH. The prophet has laid out a complaint and petulantly expects a response from YHWH (not unlike Jonah's reaction in Jonah 4:5). The word "watchpost" can mean either a place on the city walls or a place in the temple where priests, Levites, and prophets are known to have gone to receive visions (see, e.g., Neh 12:9; 2 Chr 7:6; 8:14; 35:2). It can also refer to metaphorical locations used by prophets (see Isa 21:8), especially as they wait for a military attack.

The word "reproof" (NRSV, "complaint") can mean rebuttal, correction, or counter-argument, as well as punishment or reproof. In the context of Habakkuk 2:1, the speaker has laid a series of questions before YHWH, with the salient features being the pointed questions of 1:13b ("Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?") and 1:17 ("Is he [Babylon] then to keep on emptying his net, and destroying nations without mercy?"). In the rhetorical logic of the passage, then, the speaker of 2:1 takes his position on the city wall to await a response from YHWH. However, these questions challenge YHWH for an explanation, thus placing this dialogue in the framework of a debate. For this reason, the argument/counter-argument image makes it more likely that the prophetic encounter should be phrased more sharply: "I will keep watch to see what he will say *against* me, and how I will respond (lit., "return") concerning my reproof."⁴ In other words, the prophet expects to be reprimanded for speaking harshly to YHWH but does not intend to back down.

However, in 2:2 God commands the prophet to "write a vision," so the reader expects a message, but the remainder of the verse conveys instructions about what to do with the "vision" rather than the contents of the vision itself. YHWH answers the speaker with a message to be published.

The meaning of the publication is ambiguous in some English translations. One should probably interpret the reader as "a herald" who is running because of the importance of the message he carries. This interpretation understands the participle "the one who reads" as the subject of the third masculine singular verb and the use of *bô* as the direct object of *qôrē*: "so that the one reading it

may run.” The word “tablets” is the same word used for the stone tablets on which Moses wrote at YHWH’s command (Exod 24:12; 32:15-16, 19; 34:1, 4, 28-29), though Habakkuk 2:2 does not specify that the tablets were made of stone. At any rate, the verse relays instructions to the prophet concerning the message that follows in 2:4-5. The description of the vision, but again not its content, continues in 2:3. This description reassures the hearers of the vision’s truthfulness and the certainty of its arrival, even if it is delayed. In doing so, 2:3 suggests there will be a delay in the completion of the vision. The vision anticipates an end, but the end of what is not specified.

The vision proper begins with Habakkuk 2:4, though the extent of the vision is debated. [\[The Original Content of the Vision of Habakkuk 2:2\]](#) The verse contrasts the arrogance of one who exhibits no righteousness with the fidelity of the righteous whose life pleases YHWH. New Testament writings treat this verse as a paradigmatic statement. [\[Intertextuality and Habakkuk 2:4\]](#) This comparison continues in 2:5, using wine as a metaphor for the arrogant and greedy.

The NRSV offers a misleading translation of Habakkuk 2:5 in the phrases, “*Wealth* is treacherous, the *arrogant* do not endure.” The MT actually has “*the wine* is treacherous, an arrogant *man*, and he does not rest.” The MT represents a metaphorical personification of wine as that which has an insatiable appetite. It is not a condemnation of “wealth” as such.

The condemnation of the over-imbibing is a typical wisdom motif. Wine is personified in wisdom texts (cf. Prov 20:1), which often add a decided negative spin on the dangers of wine and its alluring qualities (Prov 4:17; 9:2, 5; 21:17; 23:20, 30-31; 31:4, 6). Habakkuk 2:5a-b α thus functions as an accusation of the arrogant, thus continuing the initial theme of 2:4.

Habakkuk 2:5b β (“He gathers all nations to himself, and collects all peoples for himself” [AT]) switches from a condemnation of drunkenness to military images—images more consistent with the Babylonian commentary that expanded the wisdom material in Habakkuk 1 than with the wisdom material. This sentence thus reflects the editorial adaptation of wisdom material to the political rise of Babylon, much like the interpretive commentary in Habakkuk 1:15-17.

The Original Content of the Vision of Habakkuk 2:2



M. A. Sweeney treats 2:4 as the prophet's report of the content of the vision from YHWH, while others suggest that the vision content should be understood as 2:4-5 or 2:5-20. Sweeney sees 2:2-4 as a report of the vision from the prophet, while 2:5-20 represents the prophet's own elaboration on the report. For W. Rudolph, 2:4-5 is the content of the vision, while 2:6-20 represents a five-woe collection, an independent unit in its own right. The difficulty of finding a clean break between 2:4, 5, 6 suggests, at the very least, that these verses have a close thematic connection, meaning the compilers of Habakkuk likely intended 2:1-5 be read in conjunction with 2:6-20 even if it were not the "original vision" to be inscribed on the tablets. The fact that several of the woe oracles refer to YHWH in the third person, however, argues against the idea that the bulk of these sayings originally functioned as the vision sent by YHWH to the prophet. Thus, deciding the relationship between the woe oracles and the vision report requires additional criteria. Syntactical and tradition-historical observations help one assess the possibilities. On the one hand, 2:6b clearly begins a series of five woe oracles based on the presence of *hōy* as the key marker (2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19). However, 2:6a utilizes pronouns and verbal forms that assume the presence of antecedents (3ms and 3mp), meaning that 2:6a cannot be the original beginning of the woe oracles as an independent collection. On the other hand, 2:5 begins with a connective phrase that links it to 2:4. This phrase (*wē'ap kī*)

compares what precedes with what follows, which is usually a more emphatic example (e.g., in the translation "how much more . . ." in Deut 31:27; 1 Sam 14:30; 21:5). Only Hab 2:4, then, begins with a true introductory formula: "behold." Tradition-historically, the aphoristic nature of 2:5 suggests a closer connection to the wisdom form of 2:4 than to the woe oracles. If one assumes that the woe oracles could have existed as a thematically coherent collection block, then it would not be a stretch to assume this collection originally needed no introduction. The woe-collection (in its independent state) would likely have simply begun with the first woe (*hōy*) of 2:6b. It further makes sense that 2:6a would have been added to create the transition from the report (2:1-3) of the divine vision (2:4-5) to the prophetic woe oracles (2:6-20). For these reasons, 2:4-5 makes the most sense as the content of the vision that responds to the prophet's core complaint, while 2:6a functions as the prophet's response that transitions to the woe collection. The content of this vision (2:4-5) both addresses the core complaint with an affirmation that the wicked will receive what is coming to them and assumes Babylon as the wicked one who swallows up nation after nation (compare 2:5bβ with 1:5-11, 15-16).

Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam, vol. 2; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 469. See also Klaus Seybold, *Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania* (ZBK AT 24/2; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1991) 65.

Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micha–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephania* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1975) 215–16.

Five Woe Oracles, 2:6-20

The thrust of 2:6a returns to the topic of the wicked in general and extends the accusation of 2:4-5bα into an affirmation. As an introduction to the woe oracles, 2:6a affirms the eventual punishment of the wicked (2:6b-20). In its current form, 2:6 reaffirms the foundational wisdom dogma that the wicked will ultimately be punished. This core theme will be reiterated in the woe oracles, though the second theme that comments on the Babylonians, by interpreting the wicked politically, will continue to play a role in several of the woe oracles.

The first four woe oracles (2:6b-8, 9-11, 12-14, 15-17) follow a similar structural pattern from which the fifth woe (2:18-19) deviates. Each of the first four oracles begins with "woe" (*hōy*), describes the subject of the woe using third person singular terms, and contains a clause starting with *kī* (meaning "for, because"). The fifth

Intertextuality and Habakkuk 2:4



Through a complex hermeneutical web involving several texts (Gen 15:6; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; and Heb 10:38; 11:4), Hab 2:4 has played a significant role in Christian theology. To start with, early rabbinic interpretations connected the similar wording of Gen 15:6 (where Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness by God) and Hab 2:4. This connection is applied in two ways in the New Testament. Paradoxically, Paul uses Hab 2:4 in both ways, to support faithful living as a means to salvation (Rom 1:17) and to deny the works-righteousness teaching of the Judaizers (Gal 3:11). Hebrews puts more emphasis on the faithful living of the righteous in 10:38, while 11:4 stresses the inability of the law to provide salvation.

woe starts with the *kî* clause (2:18) and then follows with *hōy* in 2:19. At least three of these woe oracles begin with ethical admonitions and then warn of the impending political threat. This application likely reflects the interests of the compiler of Habakkuk rather than the original form of the oracles, but, regardless, the final form of the woe oracles assumes that the reader understands the subject of the woe in light of the message of Habakkuk 1:5-11, 12-14.

Habakkuk 2:6b-8: The First Woe Oracle. The rhetoric of the first woe oracle can be clearly noted from the structural markers including the introductory particle, “woe/alas” (2:6b), and the conjunction “because” (2:8). A common struc-

ture for woe oracles, this pattern appears in the first four oracles of this collection.

Habakkuk 2:6 announces that what follows will taunt the arrogant ones about whom the prophet has complained. Though it uses singular collective forms, the woe deals with a group who have taken collateral for loans, but who themselves have borrowed even more (2:6b-7). The taunt then becomes a pronouncement of punishment in 2:8, though this punishment takes on a political character more reminiscent of the Babylonian commentary than the charge of usury in 2:6-7 would imply. The wicked in 2:8 have perpetrated violence against the land and the cities. At any rate, 2:8 implies that those who have survived the onslaught of the wicked will retaliate.

Habakkuk 2:9-11: The Second Woe Oracle. The second woe oracle castigates those who have made “an evil gain” from their house. The precise meaning of this condemnation is difficult to pin down. Taken literally, two items stand out: some type of financial gain and building a house higher than those around it for safety's sake. However, the rationale for such vitriol appears rather slim. Why would a prophet confront a homeowner? However, if one looks beyond the literal rendering of this woe, two potential avenues of interpretation present themselves. This charge could be leveled against a ruler who has conscripted workers to build a house whose size and location offends the speaker. Or perhaps those being chastised were understood to be the nation pillaging the region.

Typically, then, this oracle has been interpreted as metaphorically challenging Babylon. As a result, the house is typically understood as a kingdom, so that when 2:11 refers to the elements of the building (“the stones crying out from the wall” or “the plaster responding from the woodwork”), it metaphorically alludes to those conquered peoples from whom the house (i.e., the Babylonian empire) has been made.

While this interpretive avenue of metaphorical condemnation of nationalistic aggression makes good sense of the oracle, it should be noted that the application of this condemnation specifically to Babylon derives from the larger context of the book, not the content of the oracle itself. As an independent piece, the oracle could just as easily have intended the Persians, the Assyrians, the Edomites, or even the aggression of the Judean king. The assumption that the nation is Babylon, however, makes good sense because Babylon represents the enemy created by the compilation of the book. This contextual application has implications for understanding the identity of the enemy in Habakkuk 3 as well, where preexisting source material regarding an unnamed enemy functions meaningfully when one interprets the enemy as Babylon.

Habakkuk 2:12-14: The Third Woe Oracle. The third woe oracle, like the second, focuses its recrimination on a ruler, or a ruling class, whose power comes at the expense of the citizenry. As in the other woe oracles, charges are leveled against an individual (using singular forms), but the paradigmatic nature of the oracle implies a collective entity on some level. Except perhaps for a king, the parallel poetic accusations against “the one building a city” and “establishing a village” do not really connote an individual. In this oracle, the building materials used by the builder comprise “bloodshed” and “injustice.” Further, whereas the second oracle draws on a metaphor of building a house, this oracle extends the building metaphor to the larger community. This third oracle, however, does not merely focus on the injustice done to the inhabitants but also frames the accusation in theological terms. Utilizing a rhetorical question that expects a negative answer, 2:13 reminds the hearer of YHWH’s expectations for humanity. These expectations do not include a world order in which people become commodities to serve the greed of an empire or of a ruler whose nationalistic appetites know no bounds and who works continually to consume what belongs to others. The “flame” of aggression is stoked at the

expense of the heavy labor of others whose toil produces nothing but “emptiness,” because aggression at the expense of another serves no lasting purpose.

What is implicit in 2:13, that God *does not* expect nations to serve the greed of a human ruler, leads to a statement in 2:14 regarding what God *does* expect for humanity. YHWH expects the ubiquitous recognition of YHWH’s own glory. The term “glory” refers to the manifestation of God’s presence. In 2:14, such presence is presumed to be part of the fabric of creation itself. As a result, the *knowledge* of God’s glory that fills the earth becomes that which fulfills the purpose of creation. When such knowledge becomes thwarted, however, creation suffers, whether at the expense of a tyrant bent on subjugation or at the expense of those who ignore the injustice that exists in the world. These images are heightened by the citation of other texts in Habakkuk 2:13–14.

[Habakkuk 2:13–14; Isaiah 11:9; and Jeremiah 51:58]

Habakkuk 2:15–17: The Fourth Woe Oracle. The fourth woe oracle (2:15–17) lays out a charge that sounds like something taken straight from a frat party. The ethical violation of this woe oracle is the charge of getting people drunk for the purpose of seeing them naked. This charge, as becomes evident in the rationale of 2:17,

Habakkuk 2:13–14; Isaiah 11:9; and Jeremiah 51:58



Hab 2:13–14 connects Jeremiah’s condemnation of Babylon with hope for a Zion-centered Yahwistic religion.

Jer 51:58: Thus says the LORD of hosts: The broad wall of Babylon shall be leveled to the ground, and her high gates shall be burned with fire. *The peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, and the nations weary themselves only for fire.*

Hab 2:13: Is it not from *the LORD of hosts that peoples labor only to feed the flames, and nations weary themselves for nothing?*

Isa 11:9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Hab 2:14: But the earth will be filled with the knowledge *of the glory* of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Isa 11:9 represents the conclusion to the eschatological vision of peace from 11:1–9. Recently, this passage has been among those whose provenance has been treated among the later materials of Isa 1–39, so it becomes difficult to determine which of the two texts borrows from the other. The parallels are fairly close linguistically, especially at the beginning, but with enough deviation to make any arguments concerning literary dependence difficult to prove with certainty. Still, the syntax of the opening portion of the parallel does not fit as well in Habakkuk because the *kî* introducing the next clause is awkward in Habakkuk, but the *kî* is syntactically integral to Isa 11:9. Also, the evidence is stronger that Hab 2:13 quotes from Jer 51:58, though the quote reverses some of the language. The fact that the rhetorical question seems to presume the epithet of the messenger formula with reference to “the LORD of Hosts” as the source makes it more likely that Jer 51:58 is the source of Hab 2:14 than the other way around. The fact that the context of Jer 51:58 is one of the oracles against Babylon, thus creating a subtle rationale for the quote’s use in Hab 2:13, increases the likelihood that Hab 2:13 does the borrowing.

again functions as an implicit metaphor for Babylonian aggression. The actions themselves—that is, getting one’s neighbors drunk in order to look on their nakedness—presuppose a prurient character whose actions are despicably but euphemistically characterized. The euphemism “looking on their nakedness” has sexual connotations and has been interpreted as referring to rape by Babylonian soldiers viewed by the king (Sweeney), as homosexual acts (Robertson), and as drugging guests (Rudolph).⁵ The euphemism leaves the details to the interpreter’s imagination, but what subsequently becomes clear is that this woe has in mind the brutal acts of another kingdom, specifically Babylon.

The punishment fits the crime in Habakkuk 2:16. The person making others drunk in 2:15 will be forced to drink the “cup in YHWH’s right hand”—a drink that will cause the offender to reel until his own glory is replaced with shame. Euphemistically, the image of this man drinking and staggering works on two levels. Linguistically, it suggests the man falls, and his own nakedness is on display. Metaphorically, this is presumed in 2:17. When it takes up 2:16, the interpretation of this oracle has moved into the political realm, since the aggrieved party is Lebanon in 2:17. The language of “the cup” derives from other prophetic traditions that anticipate punishment against foreign nations. [The Cup in YHWH’s Hand (Hab 2:16)]

The punishment against the prurient behavior also functions on multiple levels. It seems clear that any purely personal condemnation related to this woe oracle, if it was ever present, takes a back seat to the theological and political implications of 2:16–17. Punishment comes from the hand of YHWH and that punishment puts justice back into view. This powerful entity who abuses others for sport merely because he has the means and the inclination to do so will himself be brought low by YHWH (2:16). His glory will become

The Cup in YHWH’s Hand (Hab 2:16)



This punishment described in 2:16 fits the context well, since the “cup” appears prominently in oracles against foreign nations, most notably in oracles against Edom (Jer 49:12; Lam 4:21) or the nations in general (Jer 25:15–26; 51:7). Notably, the motif is echoed in Obad 16, connecting both Edom and the nations. The image can be used of Jerusalem’s fate (so Ezek 23:31–34), but also with the pronouncement that the nations will soon suffer the same fate (Isa 51:17–23). In Hab 2:16, this retaliation against the nations seems to be implied by the text: “The cup in the Lord’s right hand will *come around to you*.” In other words, the passing of the cup can be read as part of a sequence. This coincides well with the idea that Jerusalem’s punishment begins YHWH’s punishment against a series of nations. The fact that this imagery already appeared in Obad 16 raises the question of how this motif functions in the Book of the Twelve. It could be that this theme is a redactional implant for the purpose of connecting writings in the Book of the Twelve, though one cannot prove this claim conclusively. Two things, nevertheless, should be noted. First, this motif appears twice in the Book of the Twelve (Obad 16 and Hab 2:16), and both nations (Edom and Babylon) are presumed to have experienced the wrath of YHWH in the unfolding of the Twelve. Hab 3 reports the ultimate judgment against Babylon, while Mal 1:2–4 presumes Edom has begun to be punished. Second, the role of the cup in Hab 2:16 could well be part of an expansion to an early version of the fourth woe oracle.

Habakkuk 2:17 and Nahum 1:4

Reference to the Babylonian destruction of Lebanon in Hab 2:17 also appears in Nah 1:4, in a line where the corruption of the acrostic is evident. In fact, the expected *dalet* line of the acrostic contains two bi-cola, both of which connect to the writings adjacent to Nahum. Nah 1:4aα refers to the desolation of Bashan and Carmel, as noted in Mic 7:14, while Nah 1:4aβ anticipates the deforestation of Lebanon to which Hab 2:17 refers.

his shame. The major focus of the condemnation falls on the annihilation of Lebanon according to 2:17. This annihilation, however, affects all creation. This enemy is charged with warfare that destroys animals, kills humans, and does violence to the earth and all its inhabitants. Nebuchadnezzar was known for such brutality, even basking in his own conquest of Lebanon.

[Habakkuk 2:17 and Nahum 1:4]

Habakkuk 2:18-20: The Fifth Woe Oracle and Admonition. The fifth oracle breaks away from the structural pattern of the previous four. To begin with,

the final oracle does not begin with “woe” (*hōy*), nor does the rationale follow with the telltale “for” (*kî*). Rather, it begins with a rhetorical question (“What use is an idol?”) that shifts the theme from condemning an abusive nation to an anti-idol polemic. The rationale follows. The reason for the charge is clear enough: the craftsman trusts in the idols he has made. However, there is an element of absurdity, for 2:18 indicates that the craftsman puts his trust in what he himself created. In 2:19, one hears the pointed sarcasm mocking the worshiper while indicating that a speechless idol can neither speak nor act because it does not live. The image of the idol connoted in this passage is that of a cast image, a rather elaborate kind of image that is created from molten metal poured into a cast, or else by plating a stone with valuable metals like gold or silver.

In contrast to the idols that cannot speak because the gods they represent do not exist, Habakkuk 2:20 concludes this collection of woe oracles with the affirmation that YHWH exists in his holy temple, followed by a command to be silent (*has*) before him. This concluding verse has frequently been interpreted as the conclusion to the entire section, but its rhetorical power also stands clearly as a contrast of YHWH to the useless, powerless idols described in 2:18-19. The demand for silence marks a significant juncture in the book, recounting YHWH’s temple presence that deserves obeisance from all the world and admonishing anyone who would challenge him—a subtle warning to the prophetic character—that the time for questioning has ended. [Habakkuk 2:20 and the Book of the

Twelve]

Habakkuk 2:20 and the Book of the Twelve

M. A. Sweeney points out that this command (“Let all the earth keep silent”), with slight variations, appears in Zeph 1:7, Zech 2:13 (MT 2:17), and Ps 46:11—all of which share theophanic contexts. More to the point, however, Zeph 1:7 introduces a statement concerning the day of YHWH that implies a threat to Jerusalem, while Zech 2:13 (MT 2:17) comes immediately after the vision that announces the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the end of the exile in Babylon (Zech 2:6-12). Hence, Hab 1–2 announces Jerusalem’s destruction by Babylon while conveying the affirmation that Babylon will itself be punished. The two remaining

versions of this command then announce (1) the imminent end to Jerusalem (interpreting that event as a day of punishment from YHWH that will end the Judean monarchy [Zeph 1:7-8]), and (2) a call to rebuild Jerusalem to its former size (so that the children of Zion living in Babylon have a place to which to return [Zech 2:7]). In each case, then, this quoted command to be silent marks a significant juncture in the anticipation and the aftermath of the same two motifs within the Book of the Twelve.

Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam, vol. 2; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 477; see also Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micah–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephania* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975) 478.

CONNECTIONS

One can read a certain amount of irony within the condemnation of violence in Habakkuk. The violence described in 2:8 fits well with the description of the violence perpetrated by Babylon in 1:12-17. The irony arises when one reads this impending violence with the prophet’s initial complaint (1:2-4), where the speaker bemoans the violence in the land. God’s response is that judgment will come in a violent attack by Babylon, whom YHWH will send (1:5-11). This response creates another level of tension. In this scenario, YHWH’s response to the complaint of pervasive violence brings *even more* violence to Judah. The underlying theological assumption reflects something akin to the beginning of the flood story, where the extent of violence had so permeated the world that YHWH decided to start over. [Introduction to the Flood Story] Similarly, in Habakkuk, YHWH deems it necessary to destroy the social fabric of Judah in order to reorder that fabric with a remnant. In a certain sense, there appears to be a kind of theological catharsis implicit in the message of Habakkuk. Things have to get worse before they can get better. In Habakkuk’s world, only he complains about the violence, so in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion, only a remnant will remain. The implications for this remnant are not explored here, though the

Introduction to the Flood Story

The flood story begins with a double introduction in Gen 6:5-7 and 11-13:

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” . . . ¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.”

The first introduction mentions the wickedness of humanity while the second focuses on human violence and corruption.

writing's concluding unit hints at the terrifying prospects (see Hab 3:16).

This theological approach to catastrophe remains all too common today. However, the rhetoric and reality of such a response do not coexist well for people of faith for at least three reasons. First, this portrayal of God as the great avenger provides some with comfort, but this comfort is misguided. The idea that if one can only hold out long enough, *God* will change the situation by annihilating the problem may provide a degree of solace to individuals powerless to change their situation. Such will be the prophet's response in Habakkuk 3:16–19. Historically, however, God rarely intervenes so directly into the realm of human political machinations so as to direct one country to attack another. As a result, while the powerless and well-meaning people of faith wait for God to act in the face of social injustice, oppression, violence, and poverty, the situation does not change. Human inaction then essentially condones the status quo.

Second, the prophet's expectation of a Babylonian invasion ultimately provides little consolation for those in Judah or Babylon. Despite the text's assumption that the prophet alone sees the violence in his own society, one should not miss the fact that the violence described by the prophet has victims. The number of innocent victims who suffer at the hands of Judean violence in Habakkuk's portrayal will only be multiplied when Babylon invades. The world is more complex politically and theologically than a reading of Habakkuk alone would imply. Yet when pastors, or others of certain theological orientations, call for divine punishment on a society, they can only do so by ignoring the suffering such punishment would bring upon those in society least able to fend for themselves. When politicians on both sides of a conflict speak of the need to act on behalf of God, then the "collateral damage" from any military action is assumed to be part of a divine plan. History should have taught us by now that if both sides claim divine sanction, then one or *both* of these groups are mistaken. It is far easier to assume one's enemy is mistaken, however, than to question one's own leaders.

Third, violence tends to beget violence because humanity tends to desire retaliation rather than justice. One sees this idea embedded in the woe oracles of Habakkuk. When the oppressor seeks to build a "house" (i.e., an empire) by conquest, then the very

stones and rafters of that house (i.e., the conquered peoples) will ultimately cry out and bring down that house. Thus, the prophet's depiction of restitution in Habakkuk is double edged: the prophet's society will be upended so that those oppressing the population will be brought down by a foreign nation, but that nation's greed and brutality will ultimately bring destruction on itself. Socially, such a cycle of violence brings devastating conflicts. As a result, civil wars rage based on ethnic and religious identities. Neither side trusts the other because experience has taught them that compromise is only useful until one gains enough power to impose one's will on the other.

How does one resolve this tension? The absurdity of war as a means of resolving conflict does not mean that one can naively resort to the hope that all wars will cease. It does mean, though, that people of faith should not naively accept any claims that God wants us to attack on God's behalf. It means that people of faith should approach such claims with skepticism. It means that people of faith should insist politicians find ways other than war to resolve tensions. It means that people of faith need to enter more deeply into discussions of what it means to create a society in which peace, justice, integrity, and benevolence play a greater role than war, injustice, greed, and oppression. Such a faith is not easy, but it is becoming increasingly necessary in our world today. Habakkuk testifies to the problems when this approach fails. The idolatry of military power, making power one's god, ultimately suggests an underlying assumption: human power is finite, subject to greed and injustice. If power and control remain the goals of nations, they will ultimately fail because creation answers to God.

NOTES

1. In Psalms, YHWH is frequently referenced as a "rock" or "my rock" (Ps 18:3, 32, 47; 19:15; 31:3; 61:3; 71:3; 73:26; 78:35; 89:27; 92:16; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1). In at least one place in Psalms, "my rock" is used as a vocative (28:1).

2. Originally, the singular "wicked" would have been the antecedent of the 3ms suffixes in 1:12.

3. For a discussion of the difficulties in taking the *tiqqune sopherim* note at face value, see the discussion in O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 157 (footnote 2). For reasons for rejecting the MT, see J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991) 101.

4. The NRSV changes the verb “I will respond” in MT to a 3ms verb, but there are no textual reasons for doing so (see RSV, NIV, NAS, KJV).

5. Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam, vol. 2; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 477; Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 202; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micah–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephaniah* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975) 227.

THEOPHANY AND DEFEAT OF CHAOS

Habakkuk 3:1-19

COMMENTARY

The text of Habakkuk 3 constitutes one of the most difficult passages to translate in the entire Hebrew Bible. Detailed analyses of suggestions for textual emendation, as well as the failure of these emendations to garner widespread support, can be found in several places. The upshot of these analyses leads to quite a paradox. On the one hand, the difficulty in understanding every detail of MT can quickly humble scholars working on this passage. On the other hand, the problems in the passage do not result from late scribal corruptions. Analysis of the Murabba'at scroll demonstrates conclusively that the problem does not lie in the copying of the scroll, since this second century BCE text shows virtually no deviation from MT. The details notwithstanding, the history of interpretation of Habakkuk 3 over the last fifty years provides more confidence that the basic outline is relatively clear.

Habakkuk 3:1-19 offers a theophany report put into the framework of a prayer and a prophetic affirmation of trust. Even though the text can, in places, be extremely difficult to translate, the passage divides readily into four parts: Habakkuk's second superscription (3:1); a prophetic prayer and theophany report of God's advance from the south (3:2-7); a theophany regaling YHWH for his victory over chaos (3:8-15); and a prophetic response (3:16-19).

The Second Superscription, 3:1

Only three chapters long, Habakkuk surprisingly has two distinct superscriptions. Even more surprising, this second superscription represents only one of several indicators that the material in Habakkuk 3 had a history of transmission more closely connected to cultic mate-

Ancient Manuscripts

Shechem

Samaria legal papyri, Non-biblical (4th C. BCE)

WADI ED-DALIYEH

Jericho

Jerusalem

Qumran

Dead Sea

WADI MURABBA'AT

Minor Prophets in Greek, Fragment of Psalms, Bar Kokhba Letters (first half of 1st century CE)

Non-biblical papyrus fragments in Greek (2nd century CE)

NAHAL HEVER

NAHAL SE'ELIM

Masada

Sites of Manuscript Discoveries

The Wadi Murabba'at scroll contains the Book of the Twelve in Hebrew and is a manuscript from the second century BCE. It represents one of several sites in the Judean Desert around the Dead Sea where biblical manuscripts have been found. These manuscripts offer considerable evidence of the complex processes by which the Old Testament writings reached stable forms over time, but they also demonstrate remarkable diversity of traditions in some cases. The Wadi Murabba'at site is roughly 12 miles south of the more famous Qumran site.

rial than to prophetic texts. [Habakkuk 3 and Cultic Transmission] Functionally, the second superscription (like the first) has no direct syntactical connection to what follows. It serves as a title more than an introduction, setting the material in Habakkuk 3 apart from chapters 1–2. Cultic transmission notwithstanding, Habakkuk 3:1 calls Habakkuk a prophet, a designation that sets Habakkuk 3 apart from other cultic psalms. [Cult Prophets]

Prayer and Theophany Report, 3:2-7

This unit has two parts: a prayer imploring mercy from YHWH (3:2) and a report of God's battle march from the southern desert (3:3-7). The "I" who speaks in 3:2 is the prophet, and the prophet also uses first person speech in 3:7, 16, 18-19. These "I" speeches mark the major shifts in the content of Habakkuk 3. Habakkuk 3:2 begins the chapter with the prophet speaking directly to YHWH. Direct address of YHWH is one of the hallmarks of prayer (see 3:1), but it does not appear in the remaining "I" speeches. It is, however, the dominant style of 3:8-15. The remaining "I" speech material either makes no direct reference to God (3:7, 16) or refers to YHWH in the third person (3:18-19).

Two elements drive the content of 3:2: a response and a petition. Habakkuk 3:2a recounts the prophet's response to God's power as fear or awe (*yārē*). This response contains reactions to YHWH's actions similar to those described in several narratives. For example, Joshua 9–11 plays off the nations' response in several ways. The nations fear because they had heard what YHWH did to the kings of the Amorites; they were afraid and either tried to make alliances with Israel (Gibeon—see Josh 9:9-10) or to form coalitions against

the Israelites (Josh 9:1-2). Hence, the fear motif makes good sense in Habakkuk's response and petition as part of theophanies involving the warrior YHWH.

This imagery leads to the petition of Habakkuk 3:2b, where the prophet pleads for mercy in the midst of wrath. Essentially, this prayer assumes a stance toward YHWH similar to that in 3:16-19. Namely, it assumes *both* the coming of punishment and a hope for survival. Further, these dual assumptions fit well with the two main thematic threads running through Habakkuk: God will punish Judah (with Babylon), but God will also punish Babylon in time. From what follows, it appears likely that the reports of Habakkuk 3:3-7, 8-15 were originally independent theophany reports, but are joined to a prophetic frame (3:2, 16-19) and then at some point attached to chapters 1-2. The combined theophanies and prophetic responses reinforce the themes of 1-2, and the

Habakkuk 3 and Cultic Transmission

AO The cultic connotations of the superscription in 3:1 appear primarily in labeling what follows as "prayer" (*tēpīlāh*) and by the designation of the type of music (or musical instrument) mentioned therein (*šīgyônôt*). The word "prayer" appears 32 times in the book of Psalms and 14 times in the narrative accounts of the dedication of Solomon's Temple in 1 Kgs 8 and 2 Chr 6, but only nine times in all the Latter Prophets. Reference to the type of music (or instruments) is also common in the superscriptions of the Psalter (Pss 4; 5; 7; 8; 9; 12; 22; 45; 46; 53; 54; 55; 56; 60; 61; 67; 69; 76; 80; 81; 84), though almost exclusively in the first three books (Pss 1-41; 42-72; 73-89). A similar phenomenon appears with the presence of the enigmatic word *sêlâ* (Hab 3:3, 9, 13), which appears over 70 times in the Psalter but in only two psalms (Pss 140; 143) in books IV-V (90-106; 107-150). Finally, the prayer of Habakkuk is one of a very few compositions that have both a superscription and a subscription (see 3:19b), a cultic notation at the end of the work. "To the leader" appears 55 times, elsewhere always as a superscription in the Psalter. As with the other notations, though, the vast majority of these appear in the first three books of Psalms since "to the leader" appears in only three psalms in books IV and V (109; 139; 140).

Cult Prophets



The role of prophets in the cult has been the subject of several investigations. Evidence suggests that prophets were cult personnel for much of the history of both the first and second temple. Their roles shifted over time, but they served as political and theological counselors to kings (see 1 Sam 22:3-5; 2 Sam 7:1-15; 1 Kgs 1:5-9; 22:7-23). They were also part of the power structure against Jeremiah prior to the exile (Jer 23:9-40) and in the late postexilic texts (Zech 13:2-6). A prophet is portrayed as a spokesperson for God. For example, Ezekiel was a priest in Jerusalem but is portrayed as a prophet among the exiles for speaking as YHWH commands (see Ezek 2:1-5). Note also the different presentations of Shemaiah the prophet in 1 Kgs 12:1-24 and 2 Chr 12:1-7. In the former, he stops the people of Judah from joining Rehoboam in a futile attack against Israel, while in the latter he confronts Rehoboam leading the king to repent. Also, the Chronicler blames

Jerusalem's destruction on the refusal of Zedekiah and the priests to listen to the prophets (2 Chr 36:11-17), while in Kings the prophets' condemnation of Manasseh is the reason for Jerusalem's punishment (2 Kgs 24:1-4). In short, prophets appear as figures who speak for God in many ways. They are uniquely positioned to have the authority of God to counsel or challenge the actions of kings.

For further reading on the complex relationship between prophets and the cult, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Spirit and the Word: Prophecy and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (ed. K.C. Hanson; Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); B. D. Napier, "Prophet," in *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 3:900-903; and David L. Petersen, "Prophet, Prophecy," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 4:633-36.

reader is intended to assume the enemy against whom YHWH acts is none other than Babylon.

The material in Habakkuk 3:3-7 forms the second subunit (after 3:2). Suggestions that 3:3-7 was originally transmitted independently have not won wide support, but this option should be kept open. Its form and tradition-historical background set it apart from 3:8-15. The report style of 3:3-7 also sets it apart from 3:8-18, where the prophetic voice calls on YHWH directly. The presence of both a superscription (3:1) and a subscription (3:19b), with each mentioning different musical types (*šigyônôt* and *nəgînôtay*), also suggests that 3:2-7 and 3:8-15 are composite. Literary tensions between 3:2-7 and 3:8-15 should be noted. There may not be enough evidence to prove that 3:3-7 and 3:8-15 represent the combination of two sources, but the evidence does point in that direction.

The theophany report (3:3-7) displays a rhetorical movement involving an announcement of God's arrival (3:3a), a description of God and God's entourage (3:3b-5), a brief depiction of God's action (3:6); and a report of the response (3:7). The announcement of God's arrival in 3:3a offers intriguing insights into the diverse backgrounds of Judah's theological traditions. The announcement refers to God using an unusual word for God (*ʿelôah*) rather than YHWH or Elohim. This word provides a certain archaic feel to the text, and some would say this is a sign that Habakkuk 3 contains, perhaps, some of the oldest poetry in the Old Testament. Another element that provides an ancient feel to the text is the point of origin of God. Habakkuk 3:3 lists this point as Teman and Paran, which draws on ancient theophany traditions most closely associated with the Sinai stories. This background sets this report apart from Zion tradition theophanies more prominent in the Book of the Twelve (see Amos 1:2; Mic 1:2-5) and from the temple reference in Habakkuk 2:20.

Habakkuk 3:3a recounts a theophany announcing the arrival of God from Teman and Paran. Teman was the capital of Edom, and Paran was a region in the same general vicinity as Teman (see Deut 33:2).¹ Both place names suggest desert regions south of Judah. The traditions behind this report reflect Sinai traditions, some of which also depict Edom as the place from which YHWH comes (see Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4-5).

At least two layers of meaning could account for this variety. First, Habakkuk 3:2-7 could indeed reflect ancient poetry and traditions. Such is traditionally the way the passage is understood. However, a second possibility should be considered as well, one that takes account of the similar structure and function of Isaiah and the Book of the Twelve. Isaiah 63:1-6 contains a more graphic depiction of the warrior YHWH coming from Edom after a battle on the day of YHWH. This Isaiah text picks up on previous pronouncements in Isaiah (34:5-7) of Edom's destruction. Could it be that this Habakkuk theophany report is recounting the ultimate fate of Edom in much the same way that Habakkuk 3:8-15 recounts the ultimate fate of Babylon? Such an interpretation would tie thematically into the message of Obadiah, which anticipates Edom's destruction prior to the other nations, and the message of Malachi, which begins with a passage that assumes Edomite destruction is already underway (Mal 1:2-4).

Beginning in Habakkuk 3:3b, the report shifts to a description of the divine warrior and those who accompany him. The first part mentions attributes of the king/warrior: "His glory covers the heavens, and the earth is full of his praises." Next the text describes the warrior decked out for battle, his uniform glistening in the sun, holding his weapons (rays in his hand) and ready to unleash his power. Verse 5 describes pestilence and plague as elements accompanying him. Here, the NRSV (and others) likely does not convey the full extent of the ancient Near East background. The terms for pestilence and plague actually (or in all likelihood) reflect the names of ancient deities. One of these names, *Rešep* is attested with certainty in the Ebla tablets.² *Rešep* is the name of a warrior deity, though the word can also mean pestilence.

Ebla Tablets

The Ebla tablets refers to an archive of around 15,000 cuneiform documents discovered in 1964 near Ebla, Syria. These documents consist primarily of clay tablets written in cuneiform between 2,500 and 2,000 BCE. The picture here comes from one of those texts.

For further, reading see Alfonso Archi, "Eblaite and its Geographical and Historical Context," in *The Akkadian Language in its Semitic Context* (ed. N. J. C. Kouwenberg and G. Deutscher; Leiden: Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul, 2006) 96–109.



One of the 15,000 clay tablets in the Royal Archives of Ebla, Syria. (2400 BCE). (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

The other name, *Debêr* is less well attested, but some argue it is referenced in the Ebla tablets as well.³ Still, several biblical texts illustrate a personification that may reflect a similar background for *Deber* as part of the ancient pantheons (see Pss 78:48; 91:5-6; Deut 28:21). Given this background, it seems too tame to follow Francis I. Andersen's rendering of these images merely as a portrayal of the sun's path, indicating the deity's daily circuit.⁴ The warrior motifs are too strong to downplay the threatening nature of the report.

Habakkuk 3:6a is the only portion of this report that actually recounts the deity's activity, though more explicit statements appear in 3:8-15. Specifically, God stops and shakes the earth and watches. This imagery is followed immediately by the consequences: the nations tremble while the ancient structures of the earth (its hills,

mountains, and pathways) give way. They shatter and fall before him. This poetic imagery conveys a monumental pronouncement of impending disaster resulting from the world's upheaval when God goes forth.

Habakkuk 3:7 resumes the prophetic first person speech (as in 3:2, 16-19). Reference to tents of Cushan and the curtains of the land of Midian refer to dwellings. The location of the two places, Cushan and Midian, likely puts them in the general vicinity of the other locations mentioned in the theophany report—in the southern desert regions. [Midian and Cush]

Midian and Cush



Midian is located variously in biblical and extra-biblical tradition, but one text is particularly instructive for understanding the conceptualization behind Hab 3:3-7. 1 Kgs 11:14-20 speaks of the flight of Hadad from Edom to Midian (south of Edom in Northwest Arabia), then to Paran (in Western Sinai) on his way to Egypt. These terms point to distant areas, usually perceived as unfriendly terrain, despite the fact that Midian was also the home of Moses' father-in-law (Exod 2:15; 3:1).

The mention of Cushan in Hab 3:7, however, is more debated. The term, as spelled here, appears nowhere else in the Old Testament, but it is frequently suggested that Cushan could be a poetic spelling of Cush. Cush usually represents the Hebrew word for Ethiopia, which would put it well south of the regions mentioned elsewhere in this text. However, since Miriam castigates Moses' wife in Num 12:1 as "the Cushite woman" and Jethro (her father) comes from Midian, it remains possible (maybe even probable) that these traditions of a Cush/Cushan point to a no longer identifiable village in the region of Midian.

Theophany of Victory over Chaos, 3:8-15

The second stanza of the theophany changes its style of address and the traditions from which it operates. Nevertheless, few scholars argue for an independent source here because 3:3-7 has no good ending and 3:8 does not offer a good

beginning. Beginning in 3:8, the theophany switches to direct address of YHWH, returning to the style of 3:2. Tradition-historically, Mesopotamian and Canaanite traditions of the creation battle against chaos come into play.

The rhetorical movement of 3:8-15 includes four foci: description of the battle preparation (3:8-9a); a cosmic response (3:9b-11); a description of the march into battle (3:12-13a); and a

description of the battle proper (3:13b-15). [Rhetorical Logic of Habakkuk 3:8-15]

Two rhetorical questions addressed to YHWH in 3:8 mark a significant turning point in Habakkuk 3. The questions ask whether the target of YHWH's anger was the river or the seas. These questions are framed in

such a way as to presuppose a negative response.⁵ This expectation set up two ironic twists relative to the chaos battle story at the conclusion of the unit in 3:15. Specifically, in the Canaanite version of the chaos battle myth, the river (*Nahar*) and the sea (*Yam*) are precisely the enemies against whom the deity battles. (See the discussion of the Canaanite version of the chaos battle myth in "Baal Worship" in Hos 2.) Instead, 3:12 will clarify that the enemies in the Habakkuk theophany are the nations, led by one nation in particular, whose description as a wicked house (3:13) can only be interpreted as Babylon in the context of Habakkuk and the Book of the Twelve. The second twist in the appropriation of the chaos battle comes in 3:15, which concludes that, indeed, YHWH did trample the sea, but only as the sea has been reinterpreted as Babylon.

With the battle expectations raised, 3:9a describes the warrior as prepared to move forward with bow and arrow into battle. Translating Habakkuk 3:9b is notoriously difficult, but while it may signal the beginning of the battle, it may also be seen as the rivers being returned to their rightful place. Nevertheless, 3:10-11 clearly describes the reaction of the cosmic elements to the appearance of the warrior YHWH: the mountains, the cosmic waters, the great deep, the sun, and the moon all react in fear to what is about to unfold as YHWH stands ready to enter battle.

In 3:12-14, the battle proper unfolds in report format as though through the eyes of a spectator recounting events before the king, regaling the king's victory to the king himself. The events referenced include a march through the earth to battle the nations (3:12b) on behalf of YHWH's own chosen nation (3:13a), with the decisive blow coming when YHWH slaughters the "head of the wicked house" (3:13b), even using his own weapons against him (3:14). The corporate nature of this spectator peeks through the

Rhetorical Logic of Habakkuk 3:8-15



The four elements are linked in a rather unusual logic in that a leads to b, and c leads to d, while d contains an inclusio back to a.

A. 3:8-9a: Battle Preparation

B. 3:9b-11: Response to Preparation

C. 3:12-13a: March to Battle

D. 3:13b-15: Battle Described



recitation as the spectator describes the motive of the enemy as one who came “to scatter me” (NRSV has “to scatter *us*” because the verb “scatter” assumes more than one person). This enemy was threatening to destroy the “poor” who were in hiding (3:14b).

It is important to recognize the logic behind this battle. The poor in hiding implies that a group had already been suffering at the hands of this enemy until YHWH acts to remove this enemy. The identity of the enemy can be none other than Babylon in Habakkuk, but this means that, in the logic of the theophany, Babylon will have already done what YHWH sent it to do according to Habakkuk 1:6. As with other places in Habakkuk, even this theophany presumes that Babylon will still attack Judah and Jerusalem (in order to punish the wicked therein) before God removes Babylon and leaves the remnant.

As noted in 3:8, 3:15 concludes the theophany report with an ironic twist as the speaker affirms the essence of the chaos battle story, but only after reinterpreting the cosmic foes of chaos as none other than Babylon and its allies. Thus, the victory song of 3:8-15 comes full circle, interpreting the defeat of chaos as the defeat of a nation. In Habakkuk, this defeat—while described as certain—has not yet happened in the flow of the book, as becomes clear in 3:16-19.

A Prophet Responds, 3:16-19

The prophetic “I” returns with Habakkuk 3:16 and remains the presumed speaker through 3:19a. To speak of the prophetic voice means that one recognizes a level of interpretation made by those who added Habakkuk 3 to the corpus. The editorial signs in this last chapter strongly suggest that it had a history of transmission prior to being incorporated into Habakkuk.

The book concludes with a cultic subscription (3:19b), linking the transmission of the cultic poem with the temple groups that collected the first three books of the Psalter (see [\[Habakkuk 3 and Cultic Transmission\]](#)). While the “I” in this poem originally reflects the “I” of a psalmist, once this material is added to Habakkuk for thematic reasons, the “I” who speaks becomes the prophet.

Unlike 3:8-15, 3:16-19a does not address YHWH directly, but speaks of YHWH in the third person. The material in 3:16-19a offers the speaker’s reaction to the theophany as representative of

the group. Here the shift of the speaker's perspective forces a change for the reader as well, in terms of how this vignette begs to be heard. The "prophet" no longer addresses YHWH in prayer; rather, the speaker recounts his own reaction for the benefit of those listening.

This change is important for another reason. It assumes the same two-stage process of judgment anticipated from the outset of Habakkuk. According to 3:16, the prophet awaits both an enemy attack against "us" (designated as a day of calamity) *and* a second stage over which the prophet rejoices, when that enemy will be defeated (3:17-18). [What Happens in Habakkuk 3:16?] In the meantime, however, thoughts of this day of calamity terrify the prophet. In 3:16, he

speaks of trembling, quivering, decaying bones, and shaky footsteps—signs of fear for what is to come. In 3:17, a series of six concessive clauses relays the aftermath of the day of calamity, and the results rattle the prophet. [Habakkuk 3:17 and the Book of the Twelve] He describes the lack of grapes, olives, and grain—and anticipates the lack of meat caused by the loss of cattle and sheep. He anticipates no help from God in forestalling this attack. He does, however, rejoice in the knowledge that deliverance will ultimately come, even if it comes slowly. This knowledge of ultimate deliverance in 3:17-18 provides the prophet with the confidence to endure the trials, with which the book concludes: "YHWH is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of the deer and makes me tread upon the heights" (3:19a).

What Happens in Habakkuk 3:16?

Ω The NRSV translates 3:16 in a misleading way. It changes the translation of one of three identical prepositions (*lamed*), thus destroying the appositional nature of waiting for the "day" and "the people":

Hab 3:16b (NRSV): I wait quietly for (*l*) the day of calamity to (*l*) come upon (*l*) the people who will attack us.

Hab 3:16b (more literal rendering): I wait for (*l*) the day of calamity to (*l*) come, for (*l*) the people *who* will attack us.

Habakkuk 3:17 and the Book of the Twelve



Those who are sensitive to the recurring fertility motif across the writings of the Book of the Twelve will sense that 3:17 resonates with these texts. Hosea anticipates punishment from YHWH via the loss of grain, wine, fig, and oil for Israel (Hos 2:5, 8, 12 [MT 2:7, 10, 14]) and it presumes that Israel's repentance could lead to the restoration of these elements (Hos 2:22 [MT 2:24]; 14:7 [MT 14:8]). Joel takes these images a step further and applies the loss of the fig tree (1:7, 12), vine (1:5, 7), and grain (1:10, 17) to Judah as punishment that could only be reversed by a decision from YHWH after the people repent (2:12-14). In Joel, this restoration of fertility of the grain, wine, and oil also involves the removal of the "army of the north" (2:20, NRSV). Hab 3:17 draws from these same expectations. Immediately after anticipating YHWH's arrival from the south and defeat of the wicked house (3:3-7, 8-15), Hab 3:17 echoes the anticipated loss of the fruit of the fig tree and the vines, and the lack of food from the fields (grain) that will have resulted from the invasion of Babylon. When one realizes the connective logic behind these threats, even if one cannot tie every one of them to the hand of a Book of the Twelve redactor, one clearly sees the thematic development of the cumulative effect. Devastation of the land and near annihilation by an enemy threaten to destroy the people of YHWH. This combination of motifs will be picked up again in Haggai and Zechariah, where Haggai assumes the suffering from the lack of grain, wine, and oil (see discussion of Hag 1:11; 2:17-19) before the people's repentance is finally recounted so that restoration can begin (see discussion of Zech 1:2-6; 1:8-16; and 8:9-12).

CONNECTIONS

Two issues are worthy of consideration regarding the combination of sources and traditions one finds in Habakkuk: the change of the prophetic character across the corpus and the placement of Habakkuk in the Book of the Twelve. The flow of Habakkuk shows a development in the prophetic figure's character. The prophet changes from one who confronts YHWH to one who trusts YHWH. This shift moves not so much from protest to *resignation* as from protest to *realization*. The prophet who demands one response (1:2-4) and then a second, more adequate response to his questions (2:1) realizes that YHWH's plans to reconfigure Judah do involve the punishment of the wicked, but in ways that surprise the prophet. This prophet, who opened the book with brash complaints to YHWH, demanding that YHWH punish the wicked in Judah, was surprised by YHWH's response to send the even more wicked Babylonians to change the situation. Yet the prophet finally realizes that YHWH will also punish Babylon when YHWH is through with them. The rules of the cosmos then do apply. The wicked will perish while the faithful and the righteous will live by the mercy of God.

The themes of theodicy resound throughout Habakkuk as the prophet longs for justice, righteousness, and faithful living to be the hallmarks of society. Habakkuk, however, does not quote Exodus 34:6-7 as was the case in Joel, Jonah, Micah, and Nahum, but there is no mistaking that many of the same themes reappear here, as history and theology find resolution in the prophet's confrontation of YHWH.

As a result of the vision, the prophet admonishes society to realize the extent of its own greed, treachery, and debauchery. At the same time, these admonishments articulate the fate that Babylon will also share: destruction by God (2:6-19). By the end of chapter 2, the prophet needs no further discussion. Rather, he calls for all the earth to be silent before God and God's temple (2:20). In chapter 3, the prophetic voice desires mercy (3:2) when the unjust get their due. The prophet anticipates YHWH's intervention only after God marches from the south (3:3-7), before defeating Babylon and the nations, represented as powers of chaos (3:8-15). At the end of the book (3:16-19a), the prophet knows the road back to God will not be easy, but it will come.

Habakkuk is not, however, merely a study in character development. The placement of this material in the Book of the Twelve plays an important function on at least three levels by underscoring the accusations against Judah, by assuming a place in the metahistorical narrative that lies behind the arrangement of the Twelve, and by continuing the ideas of Nahum 3. **[Reading Habakkuk in the Twelve]**

The theology of Habakkuk is hardly satisfying to those who have the luxury of living in a distant land far removed from the ancient world. We do not typically portray God in this way when life is comfortable. However, those who compiled Habakkuk did not have the luxury of such distance. For them, the aftermath of 587 BCE demanded theological reflection. If Judah was God's anointed (Hab 3:13), then why did God allow Jerusalem's destruction? If one is to choose a god to serve, then why would one choose a God

Reading Habakkuk in the Twelve



The arrangement of the Habakkuk material does three things relative to the Book of the Twelve. First, it reinforces the accusations against Judah. When the book opens by accusing those in Judah of violence and the perversion of justice and Torah, the prophetic complaint describes the same situation facing the society as those that faced Micah.

Second, this parallel description becomes more significant when read against the metahistorical narrative of Judah created by the arrangement of the Twelve. YHWH's response to Micah's society anticipated the rise and fall of Assyria to punish Judah but also to allow Judah time to change (7:8-20). The book of Nahum then documents Assyria's downfall. It even situates the destruction of Assyria with God's justice by providing the fourth and final direct allusion to Exod 34:6-7 in the Book of the Twelve. It then depicts Assyria as a locust who is destroyed by another locust that moves on to conquer other nations (see Nah 3:15-17).

Thus, when the prophet complains, "How long?" in Hab 1:2-4, the reader of the Book of the Twelve does not hear this cry in isolation. A careful reader realizes that nearly a century has passed from the time of Hezekiah (725–696 BCE) to the destruction of Nineveh (612 BCE) by the time Habakkuk begins. When the charges of Hab 1:2-4 mirror those of Mic 7:1-7, the reader of the Twelve surmises that nothing has fundamentally changed in Judah's relationship to YHWH. Assyria has come and gone (Nahum), but the injustice and violence remains in the land (Hab 1:2-4).

Third, the reader of the Book of the Twelve sees the description of the march of Babylon in 1:5-11 as a continuation of Nah 3. The locust that destroyed Assyria and moved on (Nah 3:15-17) will soon enter Judah's world, marching forward like a locust swarm (Hab 1:9), capturing and destroying anything in its path. Such a frightening picture shakes the prophet's sense of right and wrong (Hab 1:12-15), and he demands to be heard (2:1). God responds with a vision that affirms the prophet's response to the core problem was correct. Something is terribly wrong and demands action. YHWH expects justice rather than oppression, coexistence rather than violence, and instruction in YHWH's statutes rather than self-serving behavior. Habakkuk's society had lost these characteristics and replaced them with unethical behavior: arrogance, greed, licentiousness, usury, and idolatry (2:6-19). YHWH will not allow these vices to stand and will take drastic measures to punish the wicked by sending the Babylonians, who will in turn be punished. This twofold punishment, first of Judah then Babylon, is embedded into the final form of the woe oracles of Habakkuk. In this sense, the call to silence (2:20) punctuates the pronouncements that the wicked, both within Judah and the coming invaders, will be punished. The final prayer (3:1-19) functions as both a vision and a prayer. The prophet "sees" what YHWH will do in the future and petitions for mercy. The land will be devastated when Judah is punished, but the prophet will "rejoice in the God of my salvation."

who had let Judah down? If YHWH could be defeated by another god, was not that god more powerful than YHWH? The compilers of Habakkuk responded theologically with accusations that rejected the framing of the destruction of Jerusalem as a sign of YHWH's weakness. It became instead a reaffirmation of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. YHWH did not allow Jerusalem's destruction; YHWH caused it and revealed it in advance to prophets like Habakkuk. YHWH's expectations for ethical living are so serious that YHWH will use a brutal and powerful foreign nation to punish YHWH's own people. YHWH is not a God to be mocked.

Such theology runs a real danger. In many respects, the theology of Habakkuk, which frames the destruction of Jerusalem as YHWH's response to ethical lapses, fails the test as a modern theological paradigm for theodicy because it blames the victim. However, in the context of the theological identity shaping so critical for postexilic Judah, this challenge and response proved an effective strategy for preventing YHWH from becoming irrelevant. In the aftermath of Judah's destruction, the claim that the destruction was punishment for disobedience made a strong case for paying attention this time around. If rejection of YHWH's expectations caused Jerusalem's destruction once, it could do so again.

So how do modern congregations respond to such theology? Interestingly, two basic responses generally categorize congregational approaches to political and socio-ethical threats. One approach tries to frighten people of faith into obedience, faithful living, and righteousness (usually defined in terms of personal behavior). The leadership of these congregations portrays society as wicked and any assimilation to forces outside the confines of the church walls as behavior that risks the wrath of God. It tends to portray society as that which contaminates the purity of the congregation. In doing so, however, this us-against-them approach misses an important element of the theology of Habakkuk. Namely, the problem that threatens Habakkuk's society is not just "them" but also "us." To be sure, the wicked surround the righteous in Habakkuk's world, but this does not mean evil is "out there" and we are safe within our own pious community. It means social ills have invaded the sanctuary as well as life outside the walls of the worship center.

The second approach takes a different tack toward political and societal threats. Proponents of this approach do not portray society

outside the church as corrupt, nor do they assume that foreign nations are all hostile forces. In these congregations, all societal groups have problems, and the church is no exception. The danger faced by this attitude is the danger of a certain relativity. If life inside the walls of the community of faith differs little from life outside, then there exists a danger that one problem looks no worse than another. The dynamic faith of the prophet in Habakkuk expresses genuine anger at injustice, violence, and greed. When we fail to throw stones because we live in glass houses, we also leave the status quo unchallenged.

Of course, in reality, these two congregational approaches represent false choices. We are called to live lives of righteous obedience, but we should realize that people of faith sin as do other people. We are caught in the paradox of human existence. People of faith must continuously be willing to step into the world to change the world. We must not be lulled into complacency or settle for defining righteousness purely in personal, pietistic terms. When we do not rail against greed, oppression, and violence, we allow them to go unchallenged. When left unchallenged, these forces destroy society from within or make it vulnerable to manipulation by others. The trick is knowing when to be as wise as serpents and when to be as gentle as doves (consider Matt 10:16 in its context [10:5-23]).

NOTES

1. HALOT notes that the mountain *Jebel Fārān* about 50 miles west of Petra has often been suggested as the location for "Mount Paran." See Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999).

2. See Theodore Hiebert, *God of My Victory: The Ancient Hymn of Habakkuk 3* (HSM 38; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 92–94.

3. Ibid., 92–93.

4. Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 292–93.

5. See Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (trans. Samuel P. Tregelles; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) §150d.

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ZEPHANIAH

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

Dating the Prophet and the Book

The prophet for whom the book of Zephaniah is named is unknown outside these three chapters. [Zephaniah in Jewish Tradition] According to the information provided by the superscription, the prophet Zephaniah lived in the seventh century during the reign of Josiah (639–608 BCE). Increasingly, however, scholars have recognized that the final form of this small booklet reflects postexilic concerns, so the question of the date of the prophet and the date of the book must be assessed carefully.

The seventh-century literary setting of Josiah's reign constitutes a momentous period in the history of Judah. It encompasses the gradual decline of Assyria that eventually leads to the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE. As well, the reign of Josiah saw the last attempt to reform the cult of Jerusalem, which, coupled with a political

Zephaniah in Jewish Tradition



Zephaniah is not mentioned as frequently in rabbinic tradition as some of the other prophets, but he appears to be revered. He is mentioned not only as a contemporary of Jeremiah's early career but also as Jeremiah's teacher (Ginzberg, 6:386). He is quite prominent in apocalyptic tradition (see especially the Apocalypse of Zephaniah), probably because of the motif of universal judgment in Zeph 1:2-3 and the way that motif connects with the day of YHWH in 1:7-18. Both motifs appear in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah. Zephaniah also plays a significant role in messianic traditions, where he is one of a 14-member council of shepherds and leaders assisting the Messiah. According to Ginzberg (5:130), an allusion to Mic 5:5 in "old rabbinic literature" interprets the seven shepherds and seven princes as a council who will work with the Messiah to bring about salvation. The seven shepherds include David (the leader), with Adam, Seth, and Methuselah on his right and with Abraham, Jacob, and Moses on the left. The princes include the Messiah (the leader) Samuel, Saul, Jesse, Elijah, Amos, Zephaniah, and Hezekiah.

Zephaniah is also noted as one of the four prophets God assigns to pronounce judgment on the descendants of Lot. In discussing the relationship of Abraham and Lot, it is noted (Ginzberg, 1:257) that Lot benefited four times from the work of Abraham: (1) Abraham took them to Palestine; (2) Abraham's actions made him wealthy with cattle of all kinds; (3) Abraham rescued Lot when he was kidnapped; and (4) Abraham's prayer saved Lot from destruction at Sodom. By contrast, it was argued that Lot's descendants (the Ammonites and Moabites) committed four acts of hostility against Abraham's descendants (the Israelites): (1) they tried to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites; (2) they waged war against the Israelites during the time of Jephthah and (3) during the time of Jehoshaphat; and (4) they showed disdain for Israel at the destruction of the temple. Accordingly, it is for this reason that God appointed four prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah) to proclaim judgment on the descendants of Lot.

Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

agenda to reestablish Judean control over its traditional territory, led to both great hope and tragic consequences.

The goals of Josiah's reforms recounted in 2 Kings 20–23 had both religious and political aims. These reforms ended in failure on both levels, however, when Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco II in 608 BCE. The Egyptians quickly removed Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz, from the throne and placed Jehoiakim, another of Josiah's sons, on the throne, forcing Jehoiakim to pay tribute to Egypt (2 Kgs 23:31–35). Egypt's supremacy was short lived (see 2 Kgs 24:7). After the battle of Carchemish in 605, Babylon dominated the region, forcing Jehoiakim to pay tribute (2 Kgs 24:1). Before long, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, which led to Jehoiakim's death and the first deportation in 598 BCE. Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, became king when Jehoiakim died during the siege of Jerusalem. Jehoiachin was taken into captivity along with all the treasures of the temple (2 Kgs 24:12–13), and Zedekiah, another of Josiah's brothers, was placed on the throne. Zedekiah reigned eleven years, but he also revolted against Babylon, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587 BCE. Thus, the reforms of Josiah set off a series of events that *politically* ended Davidic rule in Judah and *religiously* resulted in destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. To be sure, the Kings account is told with a theological slant that idealizes Josiah and demonizes Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.

Where precisely the prophet fits into the reign of Josiah is difficult to say. Scholars have argued that Zephaniah was active in the early, middle, or late period of Josiah's reign.¹ Recently, a growing number of scholars see the reference to Josiah in 1:1 as a note to the reader more than a date for the individual oracles. It has become increasingly clear that whenever Zephaniah lived, the writing that bears his name did not reach its final form until the postexilic period.

Zephaniah is a complex *book* despite its relatively small size. The final form is undoubtedly postexilic, but its compositional history is more difficult to ascertain. Likely, the composition draws on pre-existing source material, but its compositional aims are also evident in its clear organizational pattern. In places, this organization makes it difficult to isolate the redactional material from the source material because they have been skillfully woven together.

Dating this material requires more detailed explanation of the units themselves and will thus be done in conjunction with a dis-

cussion of the literary form, structure, and unity below. Anticipating that discussion, redactional junctures in Zephaniah appear to reflect an exilic arrangement of oracles followed by post-exilic expansions for the developing multivolume corpus.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity

Zephaniah presents itself in three sections: 1:2–2:3; 2:4–3:8; and 3:9–20. The first (1:2–2:3) pronounces judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, though it refers to a broader judgment on the entire world (1:2–3, 18b). This section contains judgments and admonitions (1:4–6; 2:1–3) surrounding day of YHWH sayings (1:7–18a). The second section (2:4–3:8) contains a series of oracles against foreign nations (= OAN) that concludes with a surprising judgment speech against Jerusalem. The final verse of this section (3:8) returns to the message of universal judgment. The third section (3:9–20) begins with a universal theme (the purification of the nations in 3:9–10), followed by statements dealing with the remnant and the fate of Jerusalem (3:11–20). Dating the material within each of these sections poses its own difficulties.

The easiest place to start a discussion of dating the three sections of Zephaniah is to separate the material that combines the fate of Jerusalem with the fate of the world (1:2–3, 18b; 3:8, 9–10; perhaps 2:11*–12). Since this material appears at transition points in all three sections of Zephaniah (1:2–2:3; 2:4–3:8; 3:9–20), one can make a case that the universal emphasis is later than the material it frames and that it reflects an editorial hand shaping the corpus at that point. Less clear is the question of the extent of the corpus before this universal perspective was added.

Zephaniah's composite character has already been noted. It has a guiding logic and draws from preexisting source material whose origins are debated. The guiding logic of the three sections includes the three-part schema present in other prophetic writings: judgment against YHWH's people, oracles against the nations, and salvation of YHWH's people. [\[Structure of Zephaniah\]](#) Three things make Zephaniah's take on this pattern unique, however: first, the way in which a universal dimension is incorporated into transition points in the three sections of Zephaniah; second, the way the sections allude to and reverse significant portions of Genesis 1–11; and third, Zephaniah's function in the Book of the Twelve. It will be helpful to discuss the three sections of Zephaniah separately

Structure of Zephaniah



The three-part structure of Zephaniah emphasizes the dynamic nature of the day of YHWH directed against the nations, Judah, and Jerusalem, even as the content of the speeches changes from judgment to deliverance.

- 1:2–2:3: Judgment against Judah, the Day of YHWH, and a Universal Frame
- 1:2-3: Reversal of Creation for the World (reversal of Gen 1)
- 1:4-6: Judgment against Judah and Jerusalem
- 1:7-18a: Day of YHWH against Judah and Jerusalem
- 1:18b: Day of YHWH against All the Earth
- 2:1-3: Admonition to the Humble of the Land
- 2:4–3:8: Oracles against the Nations and Jerusalem
 - 2:4-15: Oracles against the Nations (concluding with a reversal of Gen 10)
- 3:1-8: Surprise Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah
- 3:9-20: Restoration of Jerusalem
 - 3:9-10: Universal Turning to YHWH (with a reversal of Gen 11)
 - 3:11-13: A Remnant Survives the Removal of the Arrogant
 - 3:14-17: Lady Zion's Rejoicing
 - 3:18-20: Reversal of Fortune for Jerusalem (recalling the promise of Mic 4:6-7)

without the universalizing frame before turning to the frame itself.

Zephaniah 1:2–2:3: Judgment against YHWH's People. Apart from the universal frame in 1:2-3, 18b, three blocks of material comprise the underlying core of the first section. This material is introduced by a pronouncement of impending judgment (1:4-6), followed by day of YHWH sayings (1:7-18), and ending with a call to Judah to seek YHWH (2:1-3).

Zephaniah 1:4-6 pronounces impending judgment on Judah and Jerusalem in such a way that it includes the accusations against various groups in the pronouncement itself. The opening statement announces YHWH's decision to punish Judah and Jerusalem (1:4a).

The center of the unit restates the judgment, but against particular groups within the country whose behavior intones polemical accusations: the remnant of Baal, idolatrous priests, and astral deity worshipers (1:4b-5). Finally, 1:6 summarizes the accusations as the acts of those who turned from YHWH.

Reference to these groups shows awareness of the Deuteronomistic History—especially 2 Kings 23. [Zephaniah and the

Zephaniah and the Book of Four



For other ways in which Zephaniah demonstrates similar perspectives, see the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary, the role of Zephaniah's superscription in the discussion of Hos 1:1, and the parallels with Hosea, Amos, and Micah in the discussion of Zeph 1:1 and 1:2-3.

Book of Four] Explanations for these associations will likely vary from commentator to commentator. This material could reflect an early core of material associated with the prophet Zephaniah, or it could be part of a literary creation to provide a prophetic message set in the time of Josiah.²

The day of YHWH sayings are grouped together in 1:7-18 and perhaps derive from more than one period. The material in 1:7–2:3 speaks explicitly of the day of YHWH. In context, the day anticipates Jerusalem's destruction in 587 BCE, but this passage contains six units of varying length and degrees of independence (1:7, 8, 9, 10-11, 12-13, 14-18). When and where they were collected and

edited together is a matter of some conjecture, but most of them focus explicitly on the destruction of Jerusalem. Only 1:18b contains unambiguous language with the same *explicit* universal focus implied in 1:2-3.

Because it anticipates an impending threat from YHWH, Zephaniah 2:1-3 presupposes the day of YHWH material, but only in reference to Jerusalem, not the world at large. Stylistically, these verses change from the divine “I” of the day of YHWH material (1:7-18) to third person speech about YHWH, suggesting the prophet as speaker. The plural imperatives address the nation as a whole. The rhetorical unit calls on the humble of the land to seek YHWH in hopes of averting disaster. In context, the disaster to be avoided can be nothing other than the day of YHWH in 1:7-18a. Most important, the call to seek YHWH makes sense as a response to the accusation of 1:6, where the prophetic voice charges that certain groups had not sought YHWH.

As a whole, then, the three blocks of material (1:4-6, 7-18; 2:1-3) show a significant degree of interplay prior to the addition of the universal material (1:2-3, 18b) that frames portions of this unit. Similarities between 1:4-6 and 2 Kings 23 suggest a relationship of some kind. The universal frame will be discussed more fully after looking at 2:4-3:8 and 3:9-20.

Zephaniah 2:4-3:8: Oracles against the Nations and Jerusalem. The second section of Zephaniah surprisingly combines oracles against foreign nations (2:4-15) with a pronouncement of judgment against Jerusalem (3:1-7). The collection of oracles against the nations in 2:4-15 does not exhibit a uniform style like the OAN of Amos (oracles against foreign nations, Amos 1:3-2:16). This variation means that the individual oracles have little tying them together compositionally.

Regarding the reasons for the specific nations mentioned, three observations should be noted. First, the specific peoples mentioned (Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites, Cushites, and Assyrians) appear to be selected because they represent Assyria and its allies who experienced reversals of fortune after Assyria's downfall. Second, the end of the OAN expands beyond the nations immediately bordering Judah with reference to the “coasts and islands of the nations” (2:11), a brief oracle against the Cushites (2:12), and an oracle against Assyria (2:13-15). Third, this latter section presumes an awareness of the so-called table of nations in Genesis 10:5-11.

Zephaniah and Genesis 1–11

The allusion to the Table of Nations is the second of three significant structural elements in Zephaniah that draw on Gen 1–11 (see also discussions of Zeph 1:2–3 and 3:9–10 below and in the commentary).

[Zephaniah and Genesis 1–11] This allusion includes both Priestly and non-Priestly material from Genesis 10:5–11, which suggests a postexilic setting for the creation of the allusions to Genesis in Zephaniah—at least at the point when the Assyrian and Cushite oracles were

incorporated into their current formulations. It is possible, but not provable, that the end of this collection (containing the allusions to the table of nations) was created at the time that the other two Genesis allusions entered the corpus. If so, an exilic collection of oracles would have focused on neighboring countries, and perhaps Nineveh, while the material was adapted later when the universal perspective received its due. At any rate, the final form of the OAN is likely postexilic (see the discussion of the universal frame below).

The surprise ending to the OAN in Zephaniah 3:1–7 returns to the theme of judgment against Jerusalem with which the core corpus originally began (1:4–6). This location of 3:1–7 parallels the OAN of Amos, where judgment against the northern kingdom (2:6–16) presents a surprising conclusion to 1:3–2:5. This parallel represents one of several that help explain the development of the group of four writings (Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah) that present YHWH's prophetic message to the people of Israel and Judah in the Book of the Twelve.³ If there was an exilic version of Zephaniah that already contained portions of the OAN, the surprise ending of 3:1–7 would have made a powerful ending to the collection at that point as well.

As a collection, the oracles presume an exilic setting at the earliest since they refer to the remnant of Judah in 2:9. They also demonstrate theological reflection on the events at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries. The fact that the last group of oracles contains allusions to Genesis 10 suggests that (1) the collection was adapted as it was included into Zephaniah, or (2) the collection as a whole is later than the exile.

The selection of nations in Zephaniah's oracles conveys a purpose, but the oracles are not compositionally related to such a degree that they presuppose a single author. In other words, they are not as structurally similar to one another as the OAN of Amos (1:3–2:16) or the woe oracles of Habakkuk (2:6–20). Nothing prohibits the oracles against Philistia, Ammon/Moab, and Nineveh from having been composed independently and first *combined* in

Zephaniah. They were joined to pronounce judgment on those nations who suffered with the downfall of Assyria.

Zephaniah 3:9-20: Restoration of Jerusalem. The restoration sayings also present a thematic grouping of disparate material. From 3:9-20, restoration forms the subject of the smaller units (3:9-10, 11-13, 14-17, 18-19, 20), but the character of that restoration shifts from purification to the removal of the arrogant, to the joy of Zion, to the removal of oppressors.

The final section begins in 3:9-10 with an announcement that a purified group from the nations will return to Zion with an offering for YHWH. This image extends the universal perspective even while changing from judgment to promise. The fact that this unit combines the purification of the nations with the remnant of Jerusalem suggests it interprets (or wants the readers to interpret) the previous judgment texts as an act of purification rather than annihilation. These verses also belong with the universal frame (1:2-3, 18b; 3:8, 9-10; perhaps also 2:11-12).

Zephaniah 3:11-13 anticipates a point in the future when the arrogant have been removed from Zion and the faithful remnant lives there in security. This text focuses on reversing the judgment of Jerusalem from Zephaniah 1:4-6 and 2:1-3. It likely represents the earliest hopeful addition to the core collection.

With Zephaniah 3:14-17, the message adds another dimension to the promises by calling on Zion to rejoice. The restoration of Lady Zion herself is less focused on a remnant per se and more on YHWH's return to Zion as king and warrior. In other words, the protection of Zion is guaranteed by YHWH's presence, not by that of a human king or a remnant. To be sure, the logic of placement assumes YHWH's return comes after the cleansing, but 3:14-17 does not focus on who is left, but on the need to rejoice over YHWH's return. The metaphor likely presupposes the reconstructed temple, since YHWH's return to Zion would have only been possible if YHWH's dwelling place had been rebuilt.

The final section, 3:18-20, returns to the issue of the inhabitants of Zion by promising the removal of her oppressors, a return of her exiles and fugitives, and a reversal of fate from shame to fame. This passage draws on Micah 4:6-7 in 3:18-19, but it also appears to reflect a change of perspective by anticipating the "time" of restoration in Haggai. Zephaniah 3:18-19 and 3:20 presume 3:14-17, but

3:20 was probably added after 3:18-19 when Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 were added to the developing corpus.

Zephaniah 1:2-3, 18b; 3:8, 9-10: The Universal Frame. These three thematic sections of Zephaniah are connected to one another thematically with a message of universal judgment and purification. This universal frame also alludes to texts in Genesis 1–11 that

Pentateuch Sources: J and P

“J” stands for the Yahwist (Ger., *Jahwist*) source while “P” stands for the Priestly source in the Pentateuch. Even with the major changes to the traditional documentary hypothesis of the last decades that generally (but not universally) put “J” in the exilic period, a consensus remains in critical scholarship that “P” material in the Torah was joined to the “J” material no earlier than late sixth or early fifth century BCE. See the summary of these developments in Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel’s Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Bible 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010) 4–16.

utilize both J and P materials, a characteristic that suggests a postexilic setting for the frame (1:2-3, 18b; 3:8, 9-10). [Pentateuch Sources: J and P]

One readily sees that Zephaniah 1:2-3 alludes to the Priestly creation account of Genesis 1 and the flood story, but the expansion of judgment beyond Jerusalem and Judah widens the theological implications of Zephaniah. The allusions to Genesis texts elsewhere in Zephaniah include both Priestly material (when alluding to Gen 10 in Zeph 2:11-13) and J material (when 3:9-10 alludes to Gen 11:1-9). This combination suggests Zephaniah draws from a text of Genesis

that already combined the Priestly and the Yahwistic perspectives, and this combination has implications for dating the final form of Zephaniah.

This material drawing on Genesis appears at redactional junctures in 1:2-3, 18b and 3:8, 9-10. The fact that these texts contain allusions to both J and P materials creates significant problems for dating Zephaniah in the seventh century. In the final form, these allusions cannot be dated that early, despite the seventh-century claim in Zephaniah 1:1. While considerable debate over the last twenty-five years has reshaped the Documentary Hypothesis, the upshot of these discussions of Pentateuchal sources has moved the combination of J and P material later, not earlier. Very few see a combined P and J Pentateuch prior to the late exilic or early postexilic period. [Priestly and Yahwistic Material in Genesis 10]

However, it seems likely that the three sections of Zephaniah alluding to Genesis 1–11 would have come into Zephaniah at the same time. The sophistication of the allusions and the similar purpose of reversing the creation of the world and of promising the restoration of the nations appear to be too nuanced to suggest they resulted from separate organizational hands. Given this scenario, the fact that Zephaniah 1:2-3 draws from the Priestly creation

Priestly and Yahwistic Material in Genesis 10

The extent (but not the presence) of Priestly (P) materials in the table of nations in Gen 10 is a matter of some debate. Classic source-critical explanations note the presence of the formulaic language clearly associated with P in the framing units of the chapter (specifically, one of the ten *toledot* formulas universally assigned to P appears in 10:1). To illustrate, G. Fohrer includes 10:1-7, 20, 22-23, 31-32 as P material, while the remainder is largely assigned to J.

Recent studies have tended to assign smaller portions of Gen 10 to P, in part for literary reasons and in part because P is now frequently subdivided into more than one redactional undertaking. C. Westermann argues that the J version of this chapter included 10:1b, 8-19, 21, while P materials included 10:1a, 2-5, 6-7, 20, 22-23, 31, 32. Further, he argues the two sources were combined by a redactor (R), but not before a series of gradual accretions to both the J and P source. C. Westermann says the combined form is “relatively late,” by which he presumably means the postexilic period. He sees the work of R as mechanical but creative, since R “has altered nothing.” R. G. Kratz thinks Gen 10 has grown over time. He sees the basic stratum as 10:2-5 (the sons of Ham), 10:6-7 + 20 (the sons of Japheth), and 10:22-23, 31 (the sons of Shem) relating specifically to the three sons of Noah. Kratz argues a second stage is a supplement that relates to Gen 2–4 as an independent source attached to the basic stratum. The supplements include 10:8-19, 21, 24-30, and were part of the work of a Yahwist connecting this table with Gen 2–4. Kratz believes that the opening and concluding verses are imitations of the P style, while the bulk of Gen 10 derives from pre-Priestly traditions, probably in the seventh century, though he admits the supplements are difficult

to determine with certainty. J. Blenkinsopp, by contrast, sees nothing in the non-Priestly material that precedes P, and he treats Gen 10 as part of the Priestly *Grundschrift* that stems from the exilic period in Babylon (though he admits it may have been expanded in places). He treats Gen 11:1-9 as a satire on the Babylonian empire, the origins of which satire are likely in early the Persian period. K. Schmid is helpful in the broader discussion, though he does not provide detailed analysis of texts in Gen 1–11. Schmid notes that most of the recent discussions have indicated that Gen 12:1-3 presupposes some version of Gen 1–11. The preponderance of scholars has seen Gen 10 as P, or a combination of J and P. Those who combine P and J usually make a division between 10:7 and 10:8, but the allusions to Genesis in Zeph 2:11-14 evoke Gen 10:5-11 and thus contain elements from both sides of this divide. This knowledge indicates that the version known by the editor(s) of Zephaniah included both the P and non-P materials in Gen 10. In most models, these materials would not have been combined prior to the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BCE. Only some variation of the model of Kratz might suggest the combination could have come from an earlier version of Yahwistic material alone in the late seventh century.

Georg Fohrer, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1979) 195, 160.

Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 498-528, 3.

Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (trans. John Bowden; London: T & T Clark, 2005) 237, 255–59.

Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 87–90, 238, 90–91.

Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (Siphut 3; trans. James D. Nogalski; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010) 151–55.

account makes it difficult to place this editor prior to the return from exile. The allusions to Genesis 11:1-9 in Zephaniah 3:9-10 presuppose a J tradition text. The allusions to Genesis 10:5-11 presuppose a form of Genesis 10 that combines Priestly and non-Priestly material, with most scholars arguing for a postexilic combination of traditions.

The purpose of the Zephaniah allusions, all three of which reverse elements of Genesis 1–11, demonstrates the importance of the role Zephaniah plays in the Book of the Twelve (and in the Book of the Four Prophets prior to that). Genesis 1 tells the story of creation, while Zephaniah 1:2-3 frames the destruction of Judah

and Jerusalem as the undoing of creation. Genesis 10:5-11 presents an account of the “birth” of nations in the line of Japheth and Ham, while Zephaniah 2:11-15 tells of their destruction. By contrast, Genesis 11:1-9 tells the story of the confusion of languages that separate the nations, while Zephaniah 3:9-10 tells of the purification of the nations into a single language of purity.

The fact that one can make a case for these elements as later, redactional commentary in Zephaniah, placed at key locations, should be evaluated. Was there an early collection of Zephaniah sayings, and if so, what might it have contained? The universal perspective of 1:2-3 can be seen in 1:18b, while the majority of 1:4-18a + 2:1-3 is directed at Judah only. This universal perspective also concludes the rhetorical unit of 2:4-15 + 3:1-8. This perspective comes not merely from the individual oracles in the OAN, but also in the way that 3:8 frames the OAN and the confrontation with Jerusalem in 3:1-7. However, 3:1-7 indicates awareness of the OAN in 3:6-7. Zephaniah 3:9-10 also exhibits a concern for the restoration of wider world, whereas the remainder of 3:11-20 focuses on the restoration of Jerusalem.

If one removes this universal material, then the character of the remaining material still has a coherent message that moves from judgment against Judah and Jerusalem to a collection of oracles against the nations that concludes again with judgment on Judah (3:1-7). The question, then, is when did the promises of restoration enter the corpus? Zephaniah 3:11-13 focuses its promises on a remnant that is distinguished from the arrogant who are judged in 2:1-3, so this promise reacts with the core material. By contrast, 3:14-17 and 3:18-20 appear to presume later settings when the direct address to Jerusalem suggests a changed status. The presence of YHWH in Jerusalem assumes a rebuilt temple and thus could be dated to roughly the time of the universal perspective texts. The fact that Zephaniah 3:20 works in conjunction with the combination of Haggai/Zechariah and the Book of Four suggests it entered later. Zephaniah 3:18-20 and 3:14-17 likely entered Zephaniah separately, with 3:14-17 announcing an end to disaster, while 3:18-20 promises a return of the exiles and the removal of the oppressors. Thus, one can see three stages of promise behind 3:11-13 (to encourage a remnant population), 3:14-17 (anticipating protection from YHWH as king who has returned), and 3:18-20 (restoration on a bigger scale).

Zephaniah in the Book of the Twelve

Zephaniah represents the last “preexilic” writing in the Book of the Twelve—in terms of the chronological framework. While it appears as the ninth of twelve prophetic writings in the Book of the Twelve, the last three all presume that the people are back in the land after the exile and that the temple reconstruction is either underway (Haggai and Zechariah) or finished (Malachi).

As part of the Book of Four, Zephaniah’s canonical function not only anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem but also interprets those events as the work of YHWH because Judah had long ago lost its way. On this issue, the message of 1:2–3:8 appears most poignant. A message of judgment against Judah shows deliberate parallels to the judgment against the northern kingdom. This message comes through in the call to seek YHWH (1:6; 2:1-3), the warning of the impending curse (Zeph 1:13 [see Amos 5:11]), and the surprise ending to the OAN in Zephaniah (3:1-7), where judgment on Jerusalem suddenly becomes the topic, much like how the northern kingdom concluded the OAN in Amos (2:6-16). Nevertheless, like Amos and Micah, Zephaniah demonstrates an awareness of promises to those in the exile and beyond. A series of eschatological sayings (3:9-20) parallel similar eschatological reflections in Amos 9:7-10, 11-15.

The promises of hope for Zion (3:9-20) pave the way for the addition of other writings that deal more explicitly with life after the restoration (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) as well as provide explorations of YHWH’s control of political powers (Nahum, Habakkuk) beyond Judah. However, the promises to Lady Zion in Zephaniah 3:14-17 appear to address concerns that also appear in Micah 4–5. In Micah 4:9-10, Lady Zion has no king in her midst, but in Zephaniah 3:14-17, YHWH has returned as king. In Micah 4:11-13, Lady Zion will thresh about and attack the nations, exhibiting an aggressive attitude not unlike the assumptions of Zephaniah 3:14-17, where Zion’s enemies have been turned away and she is told not to fear. Also, Zephaniah 3:19-20 takes up Micah 4:6-7. The remnant also plays a prominent role in Micah 5:7-9. In Micah 7:8-9, Lady Zion announces she must bear her indignation, while Zephaniah 3:14-20 removes her indignation. In short, from a literary vantage point, everything that Zephaniah 3:14-20 anticipates being restored, Micah 4–7 had anticipated being taken away.

The Message of Zephaniah

The message of Zephaniah revolves around three interwoven motifs: judgment on the day of YHWH, the survival of a remnant, and rejoicing at the restoration. First, judgment is coming. The destruction of Jerusalem and Judah dominates the first two and a half chapters. It is depicted as the day of YHWH (1:7-18) and as the undoing of creation (1:2-3). Like the structure of the book, the assumptions concerning the day of YHWH in Zephaniah change from a day of judgment against Jerusalem and Judah (1:8, 14-18a; 2:2-3) to a day of judgment against the nations (1:18b; 3:8). As well, in several respects, Zephaniah has been structured as the reversal of Genesis 1–11. Creation is undone (Zeph 1:2-3); the birth of some nations is reversed (Zeph 2:11-15); and the confusion of language becomes purified speech (Zeph 3:9-10).

Second, a remnant will survive. The remnant imagery of Zephaniah presumes Jerusalem has endured a judgment of purification, but the imagery has three different foci. In one group of texts (2:1-3; 3:12-13) the remnant is described as the humble of the land, and an ethical emphasis comes through clearly. This remnant appears as the opposite of the arrogant and the syncretistic worshipers who are the subject of judgment in 1:4-6, 8-9, 11. This humble group is also addressed in 2:1-3, with an admonition of how to avoid destruction in the coming punishment. The second group of texts (2:7; 3:10, 14-17) focuses on a promise to the remnant as either territorial replacement or improvement of the fate of the city. This focus includes a promise to restore land taken by the Philistines (2:7) and resources returned by foreign worshipers of YHWH (3:10). The core material in 3:14-17 also addresses a group in Jerusalem that has been under duress in the form of threat from political enemies. Finally, the third focus for the remnant appears in 3:20 and references the feasts of mourning over Jerusalem's destruction that the remnant has held. Assumptions about the remnant in the three groups are not mutually exclusive. Together, they suggest a group who is, at first, happy to survive, but who ultimately longs for life to return to a more prosperous state.

Third, Jerusalem shall rejoice at the end of the punishment. The call to Lady Zion to rejoice (3:14) creates a different picture from that of the other texts. The emphasis is on the restoration rather than the judgment, to be sure, but these texts go beyond a vague,

hopeful promise that things will get better. The texts announce YHWH's return to Zion as king, a perspective that presumes a community in Jerusalem, and probably one that envisions the reconstruction of the temple. Something must have happened before the writing of these verses to account for the change in status of Zion, either the return of exiles in 538 BCE or the rebuilding of the temple beginning in 520 BCE. The fact that YHWH has returned as king suggests the latter more than the former. This image also suggests that, at this point, Zephaniah had not yet been joined with Haggai, because a different set of metaphors would likely have been used if this were the case. Zephaniah promises YHWH's return, but the physical rebuilding of the temple is not the primary focus, whereas Haggai presumes the necessity of the temple for complete restoration.

NOTES

1. Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah* (BZAW 198; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991). See especially his chapter, "Zephaniah through the Age's Mirror: History of Interpretation," pp. 21–38.

2. Nogalski explains the material as part of an early collection associated with the prophet (James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* [BZAW 217; Berlin, De Gruyter, 1993] 189–91). J. Wöhrle goes further by demonstrating the specific use of 2 Kgs 23 (*Die frühen Sammlungen der Zwölfprophetenbuche: Entstehung und Komposition* [BZAW 360; Berlin, De Gruyter, 2006], see the summary in 224–26 and the more detailed analysis of the entire unit from 199–205). Though he explains them differently, the connections to 2 Kgs 23 are also noted by Ben Zvi (Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, 60–78).

3. See the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary.

OUTLINE OF ZEPHANIAH

- I. Zephaniah 1:1–2:3: Destruction of Jerusalem and the Day of YHWH
 - A. 1:1: Superscription
 - B. 1:2–3: The Undoing of Creation
 - C. 1:4–6: Judgment on Groups in Jerusalem
 - D. 1:7–18: the Impending Day of YHWH Will Destroy Jerusalem

- E. 2:1-3: Let the Humble Seek YHWH
- II. Zephaniah 2:4–3:8: Judgment on Foreign Nations and Judah
 - A. 2:4-15: Oracles against Foreign Nations
 - B. 3:1-8: The Surprise Ending
- III. Zephaniah 3:9-20: Restoration of the Nations and Judah
 - A. 3:9-10: Reversing the Story of Babel
 - B. 3:11-13: The Surviving Remnant
 - C. 3:14-17: Rejoice, Lady Zion
 - D. 3:18-20: From Shame to Renown

DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE DAY OF YHWH

Zephaniah 1:1–2:3

COMMENTARY

Zephaniah has a high degree of rhetorical logic associated with the arrangement of its units. Three blocks of material present a logical progression via (1) a series of judgment sayings and day of YHWH descriptions (1:2–2:3), (2) a redactionally linked group of oracles against the nations that concludes with a dramatic statement of judgment against Jerusalem (2:4–3:8), and (3) a series of statements regarding the restoration of Jerusalem (3:9–20). Despite the clear thematic arrangement, the material also exhibits far too many tensions and jagged edges to be treated as a homogenous composition. Two recurring thematic threads weave their way through the book. By far the largest of these reflects on the fate of Judah and Jerusalem, while an editor has woven a universal perspective into the beginnings and endings of these units.

Judgment against Judah and the Nations on the Day of YHWH, 1:1–2:3

Following the superscription (1:1), the first large unit (1:2–2:3) consists of an editorial frame that emphasizes the universality of judgment (1:2–3, 18a). Next comes a pronouncement of judgment on key groups in Jerusalem (1:4–6), a series of day of YHWH statements emphasizing Judah's judgment (1:7–17, 18b), and an urgent call to seek YHWH (2:1–3).

The Superscription of Zephaniah, 1:1

The superscription of Zephaniah 1:1 connects the kings Hezekiah and Josiah through a prophetic genealogy, and in doing so relates itself to the superscriptions in Hosea, Amos, and Micah. The super-

scription labels what follows as the word of YHWH to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, but then traces the genealogy back three more generations. (See the summary about Zephaniah in Jewish Tradition in the introduction to Zephaniah.) The length of this prophet's genealogy is unprecedented, and modern explanations have tended to follow variations of three paths. First, some have argued that the extra genealogical material reflects a concern for documenting Zephaniah's Judean heritage. Since the prophet's father's name, Cushi, means "Cushite"—which is the Hebrew word for "Ethiopian"—some believe the extra genealogical material is there simply to validate Zephaniah's Judean pedigree. Second, some have suggested that the royal ancestry of this prophet explains the lengthy list of ancestors. Not everyone would have been descended from a king, and even in the ancient world some measure of respect, so the argument runs, would have been attached to the descendant of a Davidic king. Counter arguments against this line of reasoning have pointed out that the superscription mentions Hezekiah but does not specify Hezekiah, *king of Judah*. Given that the line of descendants from the king begins with an otherwise unknown son of Hezekiah (Amariah), it is a fair question to ask whether the Hezekiah mentioned in 1:1 would actually have been the king by that name who died sixty years prior to Josiah's reign. Regardless of whether this Hezekiah originally intended the king, the reception history of this verse overwhelmingly treats Hezekiah as the king of Judah. Third, several recent investigations have suggested that the lengthy genealogy in the superscription connects the prophet Zephaniah from the time of Josiah backwards to King Hezekiah and the superscriptions of Hosea, Amos, and Micah. (Regarding this literary function, see Hosea 1:1.)

The possibility of the superscription being a scribal creation is enhanced to some degree by the fact that even though this lineage to Hezekiah is only attested here, the names in this genealogy (except the father) are all names of figures appearing elsewhere in the story of Judah. Hezekiah is the eighth-century king. Gedaliah is the name of the governor appointed by Babylon in the early sixth century. Amariah is a name of a Zadokite priestly line. Regardless of whether this genealogy contains historical or artistic information, its purpose becomes clearer as one sees the number of ways that the writing named Zephaniah assumes a particular function in light of Hosea, Amos, and Micah.

The Undoing of Creation, 1:2-3

Zephaniah 1:2-3 introduces the final form of the book with a pronouncement of universal judgment. The two verses are tied together by an *inclusio* between the motto of 1:2 and the reversal of creation in 1:3. The motto, a single sentence, does three things: (1) it announces universal judgment using language that is not especially common in the prophets; (2) it underscores YHWH as the source of judgment; and (3) it evokes the phrase “from the face of the earth,” which plays a prominent role in the creation and flood accounts of Genesis. This last element is no accident, as is readily seen in the artful play on the creation task that continues in 1:3.

The logic of 1:3 expands on the motto by offering specific examples of what will be destroyed. These examples, however, are not random. Rather, the verse begins with a series of four groups (humanity, beasts, birds, fish) in precisely the reverse order of their creation in Genesis 1, the Priestly creation account. This reversal of creation, combined with the twice-repeated phrase “from the face of the earth,” provides clear allusion to the creation story for the purpose of pronouncing judgment so devastating it can only be characterized as the undoing of creation. [The Order of Creation]

These verses (1:2-3) make a bold statement of universal judgment, and their position at the beginning of the corpus strongly suggests that, in a certain sense, they function as the motto of the book, much like Amos 1:2 provides a thematic summary for Amos. Other parallels to Amos suggest strongly that Amos and Zephaniah played similar roles in the Book of the Four Prophets (Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah), with Amos pronouncing the unavoidability of judgment on the northern kingdom and Zephaniah doing the same for Judah. For Judah, however, the implications of the judgment will be so devastating that they will feel like nothing short of the end of creation itself.

The Order of Creation



M. DeRoche demonstrates that the order of creation destroyed is precisely backwards from the creation of those same elements in Gen 1. He refers to the sweeping away of creation as a means of heightening the significance of Jerusalem's destruction. In doing so, he correctly associates the allusions to the Priestly creation account as more important than those of the flood story. See Michael DeRoche, “Zephaniah 1:2-3: The ‘Sweeping’ of Creation,” *VT* 30 (1980): 104–109.

Judgment on Groups in Jerusalem, 1:4-6

Zephaniah 1:4-6 shifts from the universal perspective of Zephaniah 1:2-3 by pronouncing devastation against those performing syn-

Changing Theological Perspectives



How one understands the function of dramatic shifts rests largely on methodological decisions. Earlier critics tended to assume prophetic collections involved the arrangement of brief sayings attributed to the prophet. Thus, abrupt thematic changes simply signaled the end of one saying and the beginning of another. Scholars working merely with synchronic concerns ask only about the function of the final form (see [Synchronic and Diachronic] in Introduction to the Book of the Twelve). More recently, scholars working with diachronic methods are not only interested in the literary function of the final form but also ask at what point the various materials entered the corpus. While synchronic scholars largely reject the speculation necessary for reconstructing the history of the text as too hypothetical, diachronic scholars prefer to live with the ambiguity of such speculation when it helps to account for divergent theological agendas within the text. In the context of Zephaniah, this commentary operates with a diachronic orientation that explains the universal perspective in Zephaniah as an editorial framing device that does two things simultaneously: it underscores the significance of Jerusalem's impending destruction, and it places the destruction and restoration of Jerusalem in a broader context of YHWH's universal activities in history.

cretistic acts in Judah and Jerusalem only. [Changing Theological Perspectives] Interpreters treat this change in various ways: (1) using judgment on Judah to illustrate the universal judgment of 1:2-3;¹ (2) as the sign of a new independent unit;² or (3) an earlier source (1:4-6) that has been given a broader setting for Zephaniah as a literary entity.³

Zephaniah names the addressees as Judah, Jerusalem, the remnant of Baal, and the idolatrous priests. The phrase “every remnant of Baal” is difficult to understand as an element of the early Josianic years because the reforms had not begun.⁴ Rather, the phrase implies that some action has already been undertaken against the worshipers of Baal when one reads this unit in light of Zephaniah's superscription (see “Baal Worship” in Hos 2:7). The next addressee, which the NRSV translates as “idolatrous priests,” is treated differently by the MT and LXX. [Zephaniah 1:4 in MT and LXX] The NRSV, however, follows the LXX by omitting “with the priests” after “the name of the idolatrous priests.” In doing so, the NRSV changes the focus of the text as a quick comparison with the

NAS (which more closely follows the MT) demonstrates. In the MT, the anticipated judgment of 1:4 affects all Judah, not just the Baal worshipers. The assumption is that all are guilty.

Zephaniah 1:5 condemns the syncretistic practices of the late seventh century. After nearly a century or more of Assyrian rule in the region, and after the lengthy reign of Manasseh (who is condemned in the Deuteronomistic History for his inclusion of astral deity worship in the worship of YHWH), the reforms of Josiah are portrayed as a strong renunciation of religious accommodation and

Zephaniah 1:4 in MT and LXX



1:4 (NAS, following MT):

So I will stretch out My hand against Judah
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place,
And the names of the idolatrous priests along with
the priests.

1:4 (NRSV, following LXX):

I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place every remnant of
Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests;

play a role here. [Astral Deities] This verse condemns foreign worship: the worship of the astral deities, a prominent feature of Assyrian religion, and the worship of “Milcom.” [Milcom]

The image contained in the parallel statements of Zephaniah 1:6 characterizes the object of YHWH’s wrath as those turning away from YHWH. It refers to those who adopted the syncretistic practices mentioned in 1:5. In this sense, Zephaniah 1:6 essentially summarizes the targets of YHWH’s judgment as those who have turned away from YHWH toward the worship of another deity.

“Seeking YHWH” refers to a lifestyle of commitment to the worship of YHWH only. This expectation of following YHWH is a fairly common idiom, but elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve it occurs only in Hosea, Amos, and Micah using the verb *bqš* (Hos 3:5; 5:6, 15; Amos 8:12) and the near synonym *drš* (Hos 10:12; Amos 5:4-6, 14; Mic 6:8). This motif of the failure to “seek” YHWH as reason for punishment then runs through the Book of Four, where in many ways it functions as a general statement summarizing the accusations against YHWH’s own people. The fulcrum of this motif is Micah 6:8, where YHWH’s prophet asks the people what YHWH seeks from them: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. In Zephaniah 1:6 judgment is presumed because of the failure of the people to seek YHWH.

The echoes of 1:4-6 thus evoke two streams of texts: the Book of Four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah) within the Book of the Twelve and the accounts of Josiah and Manasseh in Kings (see discussion of the Book of Four in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary). These two streams offer a strong prophetic condem-

Astral Deities



Several texts condemn the worship of astral deities (the sun, moon, and various stars) alongside or along with the worship of YHWH (2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:5; Job 38:7; Isa 14:13; Jer 19:13; Dan 8:9-11; Zeph 1:5), enough to suggest that the problem of syncretistic worship included—at least at times—the condemnation of groups who worshiped the hosts of heaven in some form. Not only biblical references but also archaeological evidence suggests that this type of worship appears to be particularly prominent in the seventh century, when Assyrian influence on Judah’s monarchy reached its zenith under Manasseh. The 10-foot-tall stela below commemorates the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (680–669 bce), and his victory over Egyptian and Phoenician forces in Zinjirli (in modern Turkey). Note the astral symbols to the right of Esarhaddon. See the summary of archaeological evidence in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *God, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 367–72.



Stela from Sam'al with the story of the victory of Esarhaddon over the Egyptians. 671 bce. Neo-Assyrian. Basalt. (Credit: Juergen Lieppe/Art Resource, NY)

Milcom

English translations, as well as ancient translations, have difficulty figuring out precisely how to translate the consonants in the MT (*bmlkm*) in the phrase “those swearing *by Milcom*.” The MT has “those swearing by their king.” The NRSV changes the pointing to Milcom in order to provide the name of the Ammonite deity (1 Kgs 11:5). The NIV changes the pointing and the consonants so that it reads “Molech,” the Phoenician sacrificial term associated with child sacrifice and later with other forms of sacrifice. The KJV simply transliterates the MT (Malcham) rather than translating it. The LXX keeps the sense of MT as “their king.” Some have also suggested that Molech is the god of Ammon (Milkom) with the vowel pointing for the Hebrew word “shame” (*bāšet*), as appears in several texts (e.g., Lev 20:5, 21; 20:2-4). This line of interpretation also carries strong denunciation because the object of the sacrifice was human children (2 Kgs 17:16-17; 21:3-6; 23:4-10; Jer 19:3; 32:29-35). Human sacrifice is roundly condemned in the Deuteronomistic History, but this does imply that there were actually people performing this

act. Berlin makes the convincing case that these texts all share a condemnation of “Baal worship, astral worship, and passing children through fire.” This evocative language also echoes the practice renounced in Mic 6:7, though without the same vocabulary. All of these translation attempts focus on the inappropriateness of the sacrifice.

Concerning the Ammonite god Milcom, see (1 Kgs 11:5; 11:33; 2 Kgs 23:13; and the LXX version of 2 Sam 12:30). In the series of texts in 1–2 Kings, Solomon is chastised for creating worship sites for several foreign deities, including Milcom for the Ammonites, and these elements are destroyed by Josiah during his reform. The MT of Zeph 1:5, as in 2 Sam 12:30, points the consonants *mlkm* as *malkām* while most English translations assume *milkôm* as the name of the Ammonite deity.

For further reading see, H-P. Müller, “*môlek*,” *TDOT* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; trans. John T. Willis; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 8:375–88; and Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 77.

nation of the events at the end of the seventh century as presented in the Deuteronomistic polemic against Manasseh (2 Kgs 21) and in the story of Josiah’s reforms (2 Kgs 22–23). Impending judgment against Jerusalem in Zephaniah, then, assumes the logic of the Kings account, where YHWH announces Jerusalem’s destruction because of what happened during the reign of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:10-15; 22:14-17).

The Impending Day of YHWH Will Destroy Jerusalem, 1:7-18

With Zephaniah 1:7 a new rhetorical focus begins. Specifically, the remainder of the chapter revolves around sayings exploring the day of YHWH as a day of punishment against YHWH’s own people. A series of seven statements (1:7, 8, 9, 10-11, 12-13, 14-18; 2:1-3) provides a pastiche of images about the impending day of YHWH in Zephaniah. The combination of sayings, some more closely linked to one another than others, escalates the reader’s suspicion that time is running out quickly. Here, too, one needs to be clear about precisely what the text intends by introducing the day of YHWH. In every unambiguous day of YHWH saying in Zephaniah 1:7-18, the recipient of judgment is Judah and Jerusalem.⁵ [Reading Zephaniah 1:7-18 in Josiah’s Time]

Reading Zephaniah 1:7-18 in Josiah's Time

Several recent commentaries interpret the day of YHWH in Zephaniah merely from the perspective of the Assyrian threat. Doing so, however, neither explains the immediate context adequately nor takes full account of the context of the Book of the Twelve. For several reasons, one should hear the warnings concerning the coming day of YHWH not as referring to Assyria but to Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon in 587 BCE. First, the setting of Zephaniah places the pronouncements during the reign of Josiah (639–608 BCE), but the traditions in Kings associated with Josiah begin with the account of his reforms once the Book of the Law is found in the temple in the eighteenth year of his reign (2 Kgs 22:3). In this sense, the superscription would likely imply to the reader a time after the beginning of those reforms. At this point in history, Assyria was no longer a major threat. Second, in the Kings version of the events, as we currently have it, Josiah's finding of the law leads to a prophetic oracle from Huldah regarding YHWH's decision to destroy Jerusalem (2 Kgs 22:14-17), even though Josiah himself will be given a reprieve so that he will not live to see Jerusalem destroyed (22:18-20). In spite of this oracle, Josiah sets out to restore proper worship of YHWH to the kingdom by instituting a series of reforms (2 Kgs 23:1-27) designed to rid the land of all syncretistic

practices. According to 2 Kgs 21:1-9, many of these syncretistic practices were begun by Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather who had ruled for much of the seventh century (696–641 BCE). Manasseh is even blamed for YHWH's decision to destroy Jerusalem (2 Kgs 21:10-15). Third, the material in Zeph 1:4-6 appears to be cognizant of the Josiah reforms as listed in 2 Kgs 23. There has been much speculation regarding the historical events lying behind the reforms of Josiah. Recent studies have tended to focus on the political motivations of Josiah as a king with a desire to centralize power in Jerusalem. These reconstructions have much to commend them, but they tend to downplay the point within the presentation of Kings, which contends that the reforms were purely a religious endeavor. One can seriously question whether those who compiled Zephaniah would have used modern techniques to complete a historical reconstruction of the events. For them, the destruction of Jerusalem would have been decided in the reign of Josiah. The focus of the anticipated destruction in Zeph 1 is clearly Jerusalem, which by this time was not seriously threatened by Assyria. Thus, a reader of these pronouncements would have more likely assumed that the day of destruction anticipated in these texts would be Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians, not some unrealized threat from Assyria.

Zephaniah 1:7. The day of YHWH section (1:7-18) begins in this verse with a call to silence, a statement that the day of YHWH is at hand, and a description of the day as a sacrificial banquet. The phrase “Be quiet before the LORD God” has appeared in the Book of the Twelve at some key junctures: in Amos 8:3, this call to silence punctuates the fourth vision of Amos that announces the end; in Habakkuk 2:20, the call to silence concludes the woe oracles just prior to the theophany in which the prophet anticipates two stages of judgment; and here, in Zephaniah 1:7, this command for silence marks the shift to the day of YHWH material in which the destruction of Jerusalem is explicated. The formulations in Zephaniah 1:7 and Amos 8:3 both refer to the “LORD God,” and both introduce imminent judgment on God's people (the northern kingdom in Amos 8:3, and Judah and Jerusalem in Zephaniah 1:7).

The call to silence highlights the announcement of the nearness of the day of YHWH. The phrase “for day of YHWH is near” in

Apocalyptic Expectations?



Modern pop culture of late demonstrates a growing unease about the fate of the world. One finds this unease expressed in images and songs reflecting on the possibility that the world will end. Frequently, these images have little or no overt theological or eschatological convictions from which to draw. Many offer no call to change; nor do they express eschatological hope. They merely express a kind of fatalistic resignation that the world as we know it cannot continue because of the myriad dangers facing it. One such musical offering is by the British rock band Muse from their 2005 single titled “Apocalypse Please”:

declare this an emergency
come on and spread a sense of urgency
and pull us through
and pull us through
and this is the end
this is the end of the world

it's time we saw a miracle
come on it's time for something biblical
to pull us through
and pull us through
and this is the end
this is the end of the world

proclaim eternal victory
come on and change the course of history
and pull us through
and pull us through
and this is the end
this is the end of the world

When seen against the day of YHWH tradition of Zephaniah, the rhetorical purpose of the day of YHWH imagery stands out dramatically for its hortatory character. This pop song does not explicitly address its calls to a deity, but seems to address humans only. By contrast, Zephaniah's destruction is not fatalistic in the modern sense. Rather, Zephaniah's imagery admonishes people to change their behavior.

“Apocalypse Please,” *Absolution*, East West Records, 2005.

Zephaniah 1:7 recurs in 1:14. This phrase also appears in Joel 1:15; 4:14; Obadiah 15; Isaiah 13:6; and Ezekiel 30:3, but all of these, except Joel 1:15, anticipate that judgment on the day of YHWH will be directed against foreign nations.

The day of YHWH in 1:7 refers to a sacrifice and a consecration of guests. The metaphor connotes danger, since both the preceding context and what follows anticipates that Judah is intended as the sacrifice. The identity of the “consecrated guests” is more difficult to ascertain. Likely candidates include the heavenly host or, more likely, the army who will be doing the slaughter—Babylon. Given the connection between the act of consecration and battle preparation (see Jer 6:4; Joel 3:9 [MT 4:9]), either identity could make sense. The main point is that the preparations are complete and the day of YHWH is now close. This impending judgment will change the world as Judah knows it. [Apocalyptic Expectations?]

Zephaniah 1:8. The second day of YHWH saying (1:8) begins with a new introduction, but the saying it introduces relates to the day of sacrifice topic introduced in 1:7. The assumption that Judah will be the sacrifice in 1:7 is made explicit in 1:8. While 1:7 introduces the topic of the day of YHWH as a day of sacrifice, each of the next three verses (1:8, 9, 10) contains a “day formula” connecting the day of YHWH with the day of 1:7. [Day

Formulas in Zephaniah 1:7-10] This rapid succession of day formulas not only provides the sayings with points of connection, but the rapidity also underscores the nearness of the day as introduced in 1:7.

The target of judgment in 1:8 focuses on the royal family, members who have dressed in foreign garb. Interestingly, the

charge is not directed specifically against the king but to the “officials and the king’s sons.” Essentially, the implicit accusation in this pronouncement parallels the condemnation of the worship of astral deities in 1:5; whereas 1:5 criticizes religious leaders, 1:8 challenges accommodation among political leaders. This charge coincides with a seventh-century setting. After roughly a century of Assyrian control of the region, it is not surprising that 2 Kings 23 charges that Josiah’s grandfather, Manasseh (who had ruled for fifty-five of those years), made too many changes to bring Judah into line with Assyrian practices. The elimination of Assyrian elements from the religious and political life of Judah reflects a major motivating factor of Josiah’s reforms as presented in 2 Kings 23.

Zephaniah 1:9. The next verse condemns all who “leap over the threshold,” though there is considerable speculation as to what that act entails. Two possibilities in particular deserve comment. First, most interpreters, ancient and modern, have assumed some kind of parallel appears in 1 Samuel 5:4–5. This text refers to a practice of Philistine priests of not stepping on the threshold of the temple of the god Dagan as a sign of respect to their deity. Assuming this connection, one can see Zephaniah 1:9 as another charge of incorporating foreign religious practices into Judean society. Second, Marvin A. Sweeney has recently suggested that the phrase is not about foreign religious practices but merely refers to those who cross the threshold of the temple as a means of identifying the priests as the object of the pronouncement.⁶ This explanation would certainly fit the context of 1:9b, where those bringing violence and deceit into the temple would reflect a powerful charge against the priests specifically.

Zephaniah 1:10–11. Following the introductory *bayôm habû* (“on that day”) formula in 1:10, verses 10–11 describe the destruction of Jerusalem from the perspective of several districts within and around the city. Specific areas mentioned include the fish gate, the second quarter, and “the mortar.” The fish gate was on the north side of the city (see Neh 3:3; 12:39) and was named for the entry to the city’s fish market. The “second quarter” was on the western side of the city, and it housed mainly upper class persons—for example, the home of Huldah, the prophetess in the Josiah story (see 2 Kgs 22:14). The location of the mortar section is a little less

Day Formulas in Zephaniah 1:7–10



Each line in 1:7–10 begins with a new “day” saying:

1:7: Hush, . . . for the day of YHWH is near; he has prepared a sacrifice

1:8: And it will happen on the day of YHWH’s sacrifice

1:9: And I will punish . . . on that day

1:10: And it will happen on that day, says YHWH

certain since the word is not used elsewhere in reference to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the etymology of the name suggests a metaphor for a section that is indented, and many have thus considered the valley between the second quarter and the temple mount to be the likely location. This area fits the context since the action moves from a northern gate to the second quarter on the way to the temple mount. This area served as a thoroughfare on the way to the temple, and it makes sense that it would be a commercial site, as seems to be implied by Zephaniah 1:11.

The reason for the wailing of the “mortar” section of the city also raises some debate. The MT literally reads, “for all the people of *Canaan* have been destroyed.” Most interpreters treat “the people of Canaan” as an idiom for merchants or traders, based on several references in the Old Testament where “Canaanites” is a derogatory term for traders (Isa 23:8-9; Ezek 16:29; 17:4; Hos 12:8; and Zech 14:21). Sweeney suggests a double entendre that could imply that the foreign coastal lands had already been destroyed.⁷ If so, this subtle allusion would anticipate the oracles against the nations of the region that follow in Zephaniah 2.

Zephaniah 1:12-13. A new subunit begins in 1:12 with a new chronological marker (“And it will happen at that time”), which is a variation of the introductory *bayôm hahû* formula in 1:10. This unit may have a different original provenance, but it appears here to extend the description of Jerusalem’s destruction. In this verse, YHWH searches the city for survivors to punish. The metaphor depicts YHWH anthropomorphically, searching for those in hiding while carrying lamps to illuminate the darkness. This image is intended to imply that none will escape.

The second line threatens those “who rest complacently on their dregs” (NRSV), though a more literal translation would be “those thickening upon their lees.” The meaning of this phrase derives from the winemaking process and the contextual data in the subsequent parallelism. The dregs (or “lees”) refer to the thick sediment from the crushed grapes that provides color and body to the new wine. The wine must be drained off of this sediment, however, because of the danger of mold and because this sediment can congeal and make the wine thick and syrupy. The metaphor thus implies that the people have sat in the sediment too long so that the quality of the wine (the goal of the process) has become inferior or ruined as it has thickened too long in the sediment.

In 1:12b–1:13a, the identification of “those thickening on their dregs” is clarified by the image of wealthy braggarts who do not think YHWH has the power to touch them. The meaning of the metaphor in this context assumes a comparison between the wine and the people. It connotes that the quality of the wine has been compromised by the wine itself. The rhetorical logic portrays this people as having grown so accustomed to remaining in the sediment that there are no repercussions to their behavior. YHWH’s threat in 1:12, by contrast, implies that the wine will be trashed. The wealth and the houses of the people of Jerusalem will be destroyed. A Deuteronomic curse formula concludes 1:13b. [Zephaniah 1:13b and Fertility of the Land]

Zephaniah 1:14–18. This next subunit is marked by a new day of YHWH introductory formula at the beginning, followed by an extensive description of the events of that day. The following unit (2:1–3) begins with a series of imperatives that call the people to seek YHWH in one last attempt to save a remnant. In places, the description of the day of YHWH in 1:14–18 may manifest the same universal perspective that appears in Zephaniah 1:2–3, casting the judgment against Judah and Jerusalem in a broader light. This broader perspective likely anticipates the compositional purpose where the judgment against Judah initiates a judgment against other nations as well, a move that anticipates the second major section of Zephaniah—the oracles against the nations in 2:4–15.

Like Zephaniah 1:7, the day of YHWH introductory formula in 1:14a accentuates the destruction’s immanence. Unlike 1:7, however, 1:14 heightens the sense of danger by adding an attribu-

Zephaniah 1:13b and Fertility of the Land



Zeph 1:13b echoes a threat that ties into a continuing thread connecting the blessings/curses concepts of Deuteronomy with the early corpus of Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah. The concept is clear. In Deut 28, the covenantal blessings and curses are set forth as a kind of theological carrot and stick. If Israel obeys the covenant, YHWH will bless the land, provide them with sufficient progeny, and keep their enemies at bay (28:1–14); but if they disobey these covenant obligations, then a significant number of curses may also appear that affect the land, and enemies will threaten Israel with removal from the land (28:30, 38–42). In the Book of the Twelve, this motif appears in several ways. Hosea draws on the motif as part of the punishment (Hos 2:9, 12 [MT 11, 14]) and restoration (2:15, 22 [MT 17, 24]) of the land, though the connections to Deut 28 are more oblique (see 2:15). The final form of Amos also continues these images with both judgment (5:11) and promise (9:14–15). The curse language of Deuteronomy frames several of the judgment sayings in Mic 6:10–16, but this language also connects to Amos (see discussion of Mic 6:10). In Zeph 1:13b, this threat of exile, which uses the curse images of Deut 28, appears as part of YHWH’s judgment on Jerusalem.

Joel also contains echoes of this motif, but it is expanded to include any number of threats from Deuteronomy (locusts, blight, mildew, enemy attack) not included in the earlier allusions of the Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah corpus. Haggai combines allusions to Amos and Joel (see Hag 2:17, 19) with the assumption that curses sent by YHWH regarding the infertility of the land will cease once the temple is rebuilt. Zech 8:12, in context, deals with the delay of the re-fertilization of the land, and Mal 3:10–12 reaffirms the promise of fertility near the end of the Book of the Twelve. Thus, the fertility motif texts in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi tie more into the development of Joel’s use of the motif than to those in the four-volume corpus.

tive and by accentuating the speed at which that day is approaching: “the great day of YHWH is near, near and hastening very fast” (NRSV). The second half of 1:14 begins to describe the day of YHWH in graphic terms as a battle scene. Although the current state of 1:14b is difficult to translate, its point is clear: a warrior cries out bitterly in anguish as the day arrives.

The rhetorical movement of 1:15–18 unfolds in a series of descriptive statements about the day of YHWH (1:15–16a) and clarifications about the recipients and their misdeeds (1:16b–17) before concluding with a two-part summary of the situation at hand (1:18). The descriptive statements about the day of YHWH contain six nominative clauses in 1:15–16a, all of which begin with the word “day” in the construct state in Hebrew (translated as “a day of . . .”). After the first phrase (“A day of wrath is that day”), the remainder of these descriptions each combines the construct

Zephaniah 1:16b and Hosea 8:14



The recipients of judgment in Zeph 1:16b may well represent an allusion that brings the judgment announced in Hos 8:14 to fruition. Hos 8:14 pronounces judgment on Israel using the language of Amos, but interrupts that message by applying it to Judah in a way that bears a striking similarity to Zephaniah 1:16b:

Hos 8:14: Israel has forgotten his Maker, and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied *fortified cities* (*ʾārîm bēšûrôt*); but I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour his *strongholds* (*ʾarmênôt*).

Amos 1–2: “Fire devouring the *strongholds*” (*ʾarmênôt*) appears in the first seven oracles against the nations in Amos, including Judah (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). The final judgment against Samaria’s strongholds is witnessed by the nations (3:9–11).

Zeph 1:16b: Punishment on Judah’s *fortified cities* (*ʾārîm bēšûrôt*) in Zeph 1:16 echoes the punishment of Judah in Hos 8:14.

These kinds of links across writings are reminiscent of thematic threads created by editors in other contexts, most notably the development of the bones of Joseph motif creating a story line that appears in three verses across six books (Gen 50:25; Exod 13:19; Josh 24:32). In linking the motifs of Hos 8:14, both predictions of judgment against Israel (Hos 8:14; Amos 3:11) and against Judah (Hos 8:14; Zeph 1:16) come to fruition in the early collection of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah.

noun (“day of”) with two related words: distress/anguish; ruin/devastation; darkness/gloom; clouds/thick darkness; trumpet blast/battle cry. This stylistic device conveys both a rapidity of movement and a devastating array of destructive images, thus underscoring the two points of the introductory formula—the speed and devastation by which the day of YHWH will soon arrive.

The focus changes to the recipients and the rationale in 1:16b–17, where the formulations should be read against the charges in the early combined collection of Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah. Specifically, 1:16b reads like a recollection of Hosea 8:14 when read in light of Amos. [Zephaniah 1:16b and Hosea 8:14] In Hosea 8, Samaria acts without regard for YHWH and uses its silver and gold for things of its own choosing. Both charges are also levied against Judah in Zephaniah 1 (1:12–13, 18). Both Hosea 8:14 and Zephaniah 1:16b assume the

fortified cities represent Judah's line of defenses for Jerusalem that will fail on the day of YHWH.

The targets of the day of YHWH in 1:16b-17 are the fortified cities and the lofty towers, but judgment is directed at them for a reason. They symbolize the place of residence for those who have "sinned against YHWH." It is no stretch to read this rationale as commenting on the political and religious leaders' accommodation to foreign powers. These actions formed the core accusations in 1:4-6 leveled against these groups for committing these deeds.

The day of YHWH section (1:14-18) concludes with a summary that picks up two threads from the previous sections: (1) the failure of earthly wealth to protect one on the day of YHWH (1:18a α); and (2) the universality of judgment (1:18b). The former relates more to the ideas lying behind 1:10-11, while the latter picks up the ideas of the opening verses (1:2-3). The transitional piece between these two parts (1:18a β) could be taken either way, depending on whether one understands the Hebrew word *'ereš* as land or earth. Most likely, 1:18b reflects the editorial framing of the expanded form of Zephaniah, which accentuates Jerusalem as one, but not the only, recipient of punishment on the day of YHWH, while Zephaniah's early form focused more on interpreting the destruction of Jerusalem as the work of YHWH. The images in 1:18b also effectively shape one's expectations for the oracles against the nations in 2:4–3:7, which are to be read within the context of the expectations for the day of YHWH. By contrast, the summary in 1:18a anticipates the call to seek YHWH at the heart of 2:1-3.

Zephaniah 2:1-3. The next unit begins by calling the community to attention, using plural imperatives to address the "shameless nation" of Judah. Thus, 2:1-3 does not continue the universal focus 1:18b. It does, however, continue the theme of the day of YHWH against Judah and Jerusalem, the primary connotation of which evokes the Babylonian destruction that lay on the horizon for the reader.

The rhetorical logic of 2:1-3 is powerful. Zephaniah 2:1 evokes the people's attention because the day of YHWH's wrath will bring calamity (2:2) and the only option available is to seek YHWH (2:3). The urgency of the situation is underscored by the threefold use of "before" in Zephaniah 2:2. [Translating Zephaniah 2:2] Three "before" statements in 2:2 build off one another in stair-step fashion with increasing severity of their images:

Translating Zephaniah 2:2

ΑΩ The syntax of 2:2 is dense, and has evoked a number of suggestions for emendations. There now appears to be more reluctance to emend the text. Nevertheless, even a brief overview of English translations demonstrates the difficulties of making sense of the words, especially in the first half of the verse.

NRSV: before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the LORD's wrath.

NIV: before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you.

NAS: Before the decree takes effect—The day passes like the chaff—Before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you, Before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you.

Before the decree is born like chaff
passing through *in* a day,
Before the burning anger of YHWH
comes upon you,
Before the day of the anger of YHWH
comes upon you

Time is running out. The three “before” statements are balanced in 2:3 by three commands to this community: seek YHWH, seek righteousness, and seek humility. Only then is there a possibility of avoiding the calamity. This is not a call to avert the disaster but a small ray of hope for a remnant. Seeking YHWH is the only option, and it has no guarantee: “*Perhaps* you will be *hidden* on

the day of YHWH's wrath.” The wrath is coming regardless.

Zephaniah 2:2 describes this threat as a decree whose effects blow through like chaff, an image often conveying the transitory moment of judgment (see Hos 13:3, which uses a similar image for Ephraim's judgment). Treating the MT text as a metaphor explains the unusual image of the birth of the decree, and the double negatives in MT create emphatic clauses rather than negate the action.⁸

This call to seek YHWH fits the language of Hosea, Amos, and Micah, but the possibility of a conditional response from YHWH elicits echoes of Joel 2:12–14 (“who knows whether he will turn and relent?”). Stronger connections, however, appear in the paradigm of Zephaniah's function in the early corpus containing Hosea-Amos-Micah-Zephaniah. Amos 5:14–15 offered a call to the *northern* kingdom to seek good, hate evil, and establish justice so that “perhaps YHWH, God of hosts will be gracious to the *remnant of Joseph*.” Zephaniah 2:3 offers to *Judah* a parallel call to seek YHWH so that “*perhaps* you will be hidden on the day of YHWH's wrath.”

Thus, the first major rhetorical section of Zephaniah focuses on a dominant theme, the impending judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, but anticipates a message of wider judgment (1:2–3, 18b). This wider judgment will take center stage with pronounce-

ments against a select group of nations (2:4–15) before returning to Jerusalem's fate (in 3:1–7) as the central focus.

CONNECTIONS

Combined with its thematic development, the significance of Zephaniah's canonical position cannot be overstated for understanding the flow of the Book of the Twelve. Zephaniah plays the role of the literary fulcrum between the pre-exilic and postexilic settings. Consequently, Zephaniah's threefold logical movement deserves to be heard as (1) a prophetic reflection on the reasons for the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (1:2–2:3); (2) YHWH's final pronouncement of destruction from which there is no turning back (2:4–3:7); and (3) a word of hope for the role of a restored Zion among the nations (3:8–20). Within this framework, Zephaniah 1:2–2:3 deserves more reflection.

The chronological structure created by the arrangement of the writings in the Book of the Twelve contains a major point of disjuncture after Zephaniah. The setting of Zephaniah, according to its superscription, is the time of king Josiah in the late seventh century. Much of 1:2–2:3 evokes unsettling, horrific images of the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. One can hardly escape the sense that the anticipated destruction refers to the Babylonian invasion and the events of 587 BCE. The next writing in the Book of the Twelve, Haggai, exhibits a very different setting, however—the reign of the Persian king Darius (521–485 BCE). Haggai's speeches (and those of Zech 1–8) set the stage for Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi. This means that Haggai's setting skips roughly an entire century from the setting of Zephaniah. Significantly, the time skipped from Zephaniah to Haggai reflects the most drastic changes in the history of Judah. During that century, Babylon invades Judah, deports two Davidic kings (Jehoiachin, Zedekiah), destroys Jerusalem, turns the temple into ruins, and exiles major portions of the population. Further, Babylon itself is overthrown as a military power by the rise of the Persians, beginning with Cyrus in 539 BCE. Cyrus and his successors then allow the exiled population to return and rebuild the temple, beginning in 520 BCE. This last event becomes the major focus of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8.

Returning to Zephaniah, 1:1–2:3 confirms the convergence of five thematic blocks that work together to convey a moment of great import in the history of Judah, seen through the lens of prophetic theology. These five blocks (1) set the stage for Zephaniah's message in the time of Josiah, the last great (but failed) reformer king (1:1); (2) introduce the message of judgment against Judah as nothing short of the undoing of creation (1:2-3); (3) summarize the charges against the religious and political leadership of the country (1:4-6); (4) and describe a series of graphic scenes anticipating the imminent day of YHWH (1:7-18), which lead to (5) one final, desperate plea to seek YHWH in hopes that a remnant may survive (2:1-3).

The material within 1:1–2:3 does not, however, arise in a vacuum, literarily or historically. The accusations against Judah's religious and political leaders have been leveled previously, especially in Hosea, Amos, and Micah. The fact that the last king mentioned in Micah is Hezekiah (the other great reforming king of Judah) reflects important theological, literary, and tradition-historical contact points for Zephaniah within the Book of the Twelve.

For the prophetic theologians responsible for compiling Zephaniah, the ongoing accusations regarding the failure of YHWH's people to value justice and righteousness imply radical shortcomings on several fronts. These shortcomings relate to the expanse, the severity, and the longevity of the problems. To begin with, these charges were leveled against all of YHWH's people, first against the northern kingdom in Hosea and Amos, then against Judah. The failure to seek justice and righteousness summarizes the failures by which Israel and Judah provoked YHWH. YHWH expects the behavior of YHWH's own people to reflect the covenantal relationship, but the entire country has rejected YHWH's calls. Second, the charge that Israel and Judah broke faith with YHWH in their religious and ethical actions could not have been more severe. These commands represent the core expectations that YHWH had for the covenant people, and the refusal of Judah and Israel to live up to their end of the bargain represents a betrayal of the first order because they turned their backs on YHWH (Hos 2:19; 12:6; Amos 5:7, 15, 24; 6:12; Mic 3:1, 8-9; 6:8; 7:3; Zeph 2:3). Finally, knowledge that these charges are leveled by prophets from the time of Uzziah (786–746) to Josiah (639–608) assumes that YHWH's compassionate patience has endured far beyond

what would be expected. [Hezekiah and Josiah] In nearly two centuries, seven kings of Judah have come and gone (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Amon, Manasseh, Josiah). All the while, YHWH has been sending prophetic messengers to Israel and Judah demanding that they seek YHWH and live with justice and righteousness as their guiding societal and religious principles. Now divine patience is about to come to an end as Judah is about to be held accountable in the eyes of the prophets. The day of YHWH against Judah and Jerusalem is at hand.

This background echoes in the context against which Zephaniah is set. YHWH's people have rejected repeated calls, leaving no part of the kingdom where YHWH can find loyal subjects. The people, the priests, and the royal family have repeatedly rejected the thing that matters most to YHWH—recognition that YHWH alone is God. These groups have worshiped other deities, forsaking the fruits of justice and righteousness for cultic abominations. The situation has gone unchanged for so long that YHWH's patience has run out. YHWH will intervene to destroy the created order, to devastate Jerusalem in order to save a remnant. In the end, the expanse, severity, and longevity of the problem can no longer be ignored in the eyes of YHWH. The prophet can only issue a call to the “humble of the land” to seek righteousness in the hope that they will be “hidden on the day of YHWH's wrath.”

For modern communities of faith, this ancient reflection should cause believers to consider our own commitments, even if questions do not lead to easy answers. How do we show our loyalty and commitment to God? Do we, as individuals and as congregations, put our faith in cultural symbols of religion, or do we recognize that God is God of the entire world? In Zephaniah's world, the “anticipated” destruction of Jerusalem functions poetically as a

Hezekiah and Josiah



Historically, the gap of more than seventy years roughly sixty years between the death of Hezekiah (696 BCE) and the reforms Josiah (639–608) instituted in his eighteenth year (622) is a powerful indictment against YHWH's people. These two kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, do not represent just any two kings. They are the reformers who seek to put Jerusalem in order after it had strayed from YHWH. Apart from David and Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah are the only two kings who get any real positive treatment from the Deuteronomistic Historian, largely because of their willingness to purify the cult of Jerusalem. During the sixty-year gap between them, Manasseh ruled for fifty-five years (696–641 BCE). Yet he is treated very differently by the Deuteronomistic Historian. He is depicted as the worst of the kings of Judah, and his actions are evaluated so negatively that the Deuteronomistic Historian lays the blame for Jerusalem's destruction at the feet of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:10-15). It should be noted that this evaluation of Manasseh is a theological evaluation. Historically, it has become increasingly clear that Manasseh's reign represented a relatively stable period of economic prosperity and expansion. In all likelihood, Manasseh's genius lay in his ability to get along with his Assyrian overlords. Unlike Hezekiah, who had revolted against Assyria, Manasseh appears to have pursued policies of political and religious accommodation that laid the groundwork for economic prosperity during the middle years of the seventh century. For the Deuteronomistic Historian, though, this prosperity came at too high a price. This is why the compiler of Kings makes no reference to the economic gains under Manasseh, for they came about only as Assyrian religious practices became increasingly tolerated and even advocated.

reversal of creation. In our world, we live in a time when universal destruction is a literal possibility. In Zephaniah's world, the prophet condemns the religious and political leaders as the cause of impending destruction of the people. In our world, this symbiosis grows more complicated as religion and politics become more intertwined in the public discourse. When religion is the tool of the state, a prophetic voice must stand up and point to God's call for an end to violence so as to trust in the name of God. In Zephaniah's world, no priest, prophet, or king would heed the call to cease practicing injustice and apostasy. What will happen in our world? In Zephaniah's world, only a humble remnant will survive YHWH's day of wrath. In our world, the stakes are higher, but we are still called to wait on God and to seek refuge in a God who wishes us to do justice, seek righteousness, and find humility (2:3; cf. Hos 12:6; Amos 5:15, 25; Mic 6:6-8).

NOTES

1. See Arvid S. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah: Morphology and Ideas* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975) 15–16; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micha, Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975) 264.

2. Marvin A. Sweeney sees 1:2 and 1:3 as beginning new units while treating 1:4 as a continuation of 1:3 (*Zephaniah* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003] 62). In doing so, he rejects allusions to the flood and creation accounts that are present in 1:2-3 that refer literally to Genesis.

3. See Ernst Sellin, *Das Zwölfprophetenbuch* (KAT 12/2; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1930) 72; Karl Elliger, *Das Buch der Zwölf Kleinen Propheten 2: Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania, Haggai, Sacharja, Maleachi* (ATD 25; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1950) 56–57; Günter Krinetzki, *Zephanstudien: Motiv- und Traditionskritik und Kompositions- und Redaktionskritik* (Regensberger Studien zur Theologie 7; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1977) 45–47; James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 187–88.

4. So Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 67–68. His resolution of the dilemma as indication of an early date is not, however, convincing.

5. Zeph 1:18b refers to "all the inhabitants of the 'ereš (which could be either land or earth). More will be said about this case below. See the discussion of 1:18b.

6. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 85–88.

7. *Ibid.*, 91.

8. See E. Kautzsch, GKC (trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) §152y.

JUDGMENT ON FOREIGN NATIONS AND JUDAH

Zephaniah 2:4–3:8

COMMENTARY

The second section of Zephaniah (2:4–3:8) comprises two parts: a composite collection of oracles against five nations (2:4-15) and a woe oracle (3:1-8) that surprisingly announces Jerusalem’s destruction. These two parts function together. The opening word of Zephaniah 2:4 editorially links Zephaniah 2:4–3:8 to the preceding unit (1:2–2:3) by using the conjunction “because, for” (*kî*). For those compiling Zephaniah, the oracles against the foreign nations in 2:4-15 (Oracles against the Nations = OAN) relate logically to the destruction of Jerusalem—a topic that concluded with 2:1-3. Conversely, the end of the OAN (2:15) is not the end of Zephaniah’s center section (2:4–3:8). In a rhetorical move reminiscent of the OAN in Amos, Zephaniah 3:1 moves *immediately* from judgment against Nineveh (2:13-15) to judgment against *Jerusalem* (3:1-7) and the nations (3:8). Thus, *because* 3:1-7 unexpectedly returns to the issue of Jerusalem’s destruction, it conveys a concept of judgment against the nations as a precursor to Jerusalem’s destruction, one that is parallel to the transition of 2:4 (following 2:1-3). Relatedly, Amos’s OAN concluded with judgment on Israel.

Oracles against Foreign Nations, 2:4-15

The content of 2:4-15 takes a dramatic shift from the preceding message of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem to pronouncing judgment on five foreign groups (Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Cushites, and Assyrians). The rhetorical strategy for including the oracles against the foreign nations is not isolated from the judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. Rather, the causal conjunction *kî* ties the judgment of the shameless nation addressed in 2:1-3 with those

of the nations in 2:4-15. This means the judgment of 1:2–2:3 is syntactically connected with the judgment against the nations in 2:4-15. To understand the significance of this connection, one must keep both the individual oracles and the group as a whole in view when interpreting the middle section of Zephaniah.

The combination of nations in 2:4-15 is no random grouping. Recent studies suggest that a conceptual understanding accounts for the specific nations castigated in 2:4-15: the Philistines (2:4-7), Ammonites/Moabites (2:8-11), Cushites (2:12), and Assyrians (2:13-15). These nations suffered as a result of Assyria's downfall and the simultaneous expansion of the Babylonians at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries.

The Oracle against the Philistines (2:4-7). Zephaniah 2:4 functions as a "bridge," containing elements that link it with both 2:1-3 and 2:5-7.¹ As noted, a conjunction ties 2:4 with 2:1-3, while 2:5 starts with *hōy*, a word that typically begins a new unit. Nevertheless, the Philistine cities mentioned in 2:4 connect materially with 2:5-7, so 2:4 is not independent.

The initial verses of Zephaniah's OAN pronounce judgment on the Philistine region (2:4-7). Typically, prophetic oracles against Philistia use some combination of the five major Philistine cities. Those mentioned in Zephaniah 2:4 (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron) include the four cities still viable at the end of the sixth century BCE. The reason for omitting the fifth city, Gath, has created speculation. Some believe Gath is left out because it was under Judean control during the seventh century,² but the archaeological evidence convinces Robert Haak that Judah did not control Gath at this point.³ Rather, Haak argues that Gath was destroyed in the eighth century. In either case, Gath does not appear to have been a prominent entity in the late seventh century, and Sennacherib gave Judean territory to at least three of these cities at the end of the eighth century.⁴

These four cities are the same four mentioned in the Philistine oracle in Amos 1:6-8, though they are mentioned in a slightly different order (Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron) than in Zephaniah 2:4 (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron).⁵ Given the literary function of 2:4 as a bridge, it is not unreasonable to think this echo of Amos's Philistine cities comes from the compositional hand of the editors working on Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah. Apart from the names of the towns, the language of 2:4 admittedly does

not evoke Amos, so one cannot prove that Amos 1:6–8 influenced the editor in Zephaniah 2:4, but the parallels are noteworthy.

The remaining verses of the Philistine oracle (2:5–7) cohere much more closely. Zephaniah 2:5 introduces a woe oracle that follows the woe oracle pattern fairly closely. It begins with *hōy* (“woe,” “alas”) and is followed by the naming of the oracle’s target (inhabitants of the seacoast, nation of the Cherethites), before pronouncing judgment (2:5bβ). The term “coast” in 2:5, 6, 7 refers to the inhabitants of the Philistine region and connects these three verses closely with one another. The Cherethites were the people of Crete across the Mediterranean. The term plays off the tradition that the Philistines were sea peoples who migrated into the region in the distant past. The woe oracle changes focus as 2:6 leads into 2:7. While translation difficulties make precision difficult, the message of Zephaniah 2:6 focuses on how the uninhabited land on the Philistine coast will become pasture land. Zephaniah 2:7 suggests, however, that the restoration of land to the “remnant of the house of Judah” motivates the punishment of Philistia. The logic of the woe oracle, then, moves from the depopulation of the Philistine coast to its repopulation by a restored Judah.

The phrase “remnant of the house of Judah” clearly presupposes a Judean setting, but it has been interpreted in at least two ways. First, it has often been interpreted as the reflection (or interpolation) of a postexilic setting. In this vein, the remnant population of Judah refers to the Babylonian exiles who are here promised the ability to expand into the Philistine coastal region. Second, the “remnant of the house of Judah” has been interpreted as referring to a group of Judeans who had been forcibly moved into Philistia by the Assyrians in the seventh century to help with the production of olive oil.⁶ Proponents of this approach interpret the verses in light of Josiah’s reform movement that sought to retake land lost to the Assyrians. In either case, the promise of Judah’s resurgence (as a seventh-century or sixth-century phenomenon) becomes a promise within a woe oracle. The phrase “restore their fortunes/captivity,” however, suggests that the setting of the oracle fits better after Jerusalem’s destruction than before.⁷

The Oracle against the Moabites and Ammonites (2:8–11). In 2:8, the target of the oracle changes from the Philistines (2:4–7) to the Moabites and Ammonites (2:8–11). In Zephaniah 2:8–9, one sees the clear outline of a judgment oracle. The charge—i.e., taunting

Judah—appears in 2:8, while the punishment and rationale begins in 2:9 (introduced with “therefore” as is typical of judgment oracles) and continues through 2:11. Like the Philistines, the Ammonites and Moabites held territory during the Assyrian period that had belonged to Judah. Ammon and Moab had much more collegial relations with Assyria than did Judah. For many, the taunts of Judah by Ammon and Moab imply an Assyrian period setting during Josiah’s time. These verses assume that since Assyria was declining, its allies would also decline. Thus, proponents of a late seventh century date for these sayings make the case that the oracles reflect the animosity of that time.⁸

Several observations, however, suggest that these nations were not chosen merely for their pro-Assyrian stance, but with knowledge of later developments. First, both Ammon and Moab fared poorly after the departure of Assyria from the region. Without the benefit of a strong Assyrian presence, attacks from nomadic, Arabic tribes became a problem for Ammon and Moab. Eventually, they sided with the Babylonians for a time. In 599 BCE, they provided troops to Babylon to help attack these Arabic tribes, but apparently the price for allegiance to Babylon was too high, for by 593 these countries (along with Edom, Tyre, and Sidon) sent representatives to Jerusalem to discuss the feasibility of revolting against Babylon (see Jer 27:3-7). Apparently, nothing came of these meetings, but hostility developed between the neighbors. Ammon, in particular, quickly took advantage of the power vacuum after Jerusalem’s destruction in 587 BCE, since the Ammonite king is blamed for aiding in the assassination of Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor after Jerusalem’s destruction (see Jer 41:14-15). Ezekiel 21:18-23 suggests Nebuchadnezzar had to make a choice whether to attack Judah or Ammon first. It describes a scenario in which Nebuchadnezzar comes to a crossroad, where one road leads to Jerusalem and another to Rabbah (capital of Ammon). The king determines to move first against Jerusalem. Josephus records a campaign against Ammon and Moab five years after Jerusalem’s destruction (*Ant* 10.9.181). Thus, both Ammon and Moab were devastated by Babylon, but probably later than Judah. In short, animosity between Ammon, Moab, and Judah becomes more pronounced in the aftermath of the events of 587 than it was before 587.

Second, the judgment against Moab and Ammon combines two different motifs from Genesis. It draws on stories combined in Genesis 18–19. The pronouncement of punishment assumes traditions from Genesis by referring to Sodom and Gomorrah. For this judgment to make sense, one must recognize the tradition associated with the story of Lot and Abraham that resulted in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that tradition is found in Genesis 18–19. Included in these chapters, one also finds the story of Moabite and Ammonite origins associated with the incestuous actions of Lot's daughters in the aftermath of that destruction (19:30–38). The allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah in Zephaniah makes more sense if it were already associated with the seduction of Lot's daughters. These traditions would most likely have been combined with one another by the time of the exile, though the combination of the final form of the Pentateuch remains a debated topic.⁹

Third, punishment against the Moabites and Ammonites assumes their destruction and Judah's retaliation against them in Zephaniah 2:9b. References to "the remnant of my people" and "survivors" who will plunder and possess these regions assume Judah has been overrun. These terms make sense after Jerusalem's destruction. Zephaniah 2:10 essentially repeats the charge of 2:8, but the pronoun "this" refers back to 2:9. Sweeney astutely refers to 2:10 as a "summary appraisal" of the preceding verses.¹⁰ Zephaniah 2:10 also implies that disaster had occurred to Judah about which foreigners gloated, and this boasting is the reason for YHWH's punishment.

With Zephaniah 2:11, broader geographical and theological implications enter the picture. The verse continues to pronounce punishment on Ammon and Moab, but then makes a henotheistic claim that all the gods of the nations will bow down before YHWH. [Henotheism] This verse anticipates a motif that will return in 3:9. It does not explain the presence of other gods, except to portray them as subordinate to YHWH.

The syntax of 2:11b is strained but the point is clear. The actions YHWH pronounces against Ammon and Moab will terrify the gods of the other nations, and those nations will thus prostrate themselves to YHWH in the

Henotheism



Henotheism means the worship of one god without denying the existence of other deities. The term can be used as a synonym for monolatry, though some define monolatry more specifically as the deliberate choice of one god as *worthy* of service. See Kevin A. Wilson, "Monolatry," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 4:137.

distant lands. The phrase “islands of the nations” appears only here and in Genesis 10:5, where it refers to the descendants of Japheth (10:2-5). The descendants of Japheth apparently include lands in Asia Minor and beyond, including Greece (= Javan in Gen 10:2).

Cushites in Zephaniah 2:12



A. Berlin lists no fewer than five interpretive avenues for “Cushites” taken by various scholars: (1) Egypt; (2) Ethiopia; (3) Midian; (4) Arabian tribes; and (5) Mesopotamia. Berlin dismisses three of these geographical possibilities fairly readily. (1) Ethiopia as a cipher for Egypt in general. This option appeals to some scholars because Egypt in the seventh century (25th dynasty) had Ethiopian heritage. This option, however, ignores the fact that while Cush is sometimes used in parallel with Egypt, it never appears *in place of* Egypt in any other text. Berlin rightly rejects this option. (2) Ethiopia has perhaps the biggest appeal, since a number of other scholars make this association and since “Cush” does refer to Ethiopia in a number of texts. Ethiopia would have a certain geographic symmetry when combined with other nations in Zeph 2:4-15 since there is a west/east axis (Philistines/Ammonites and Moabites), and Cush/Assyria could be a south/north axis. (3) Several texts put Cush in the vicinity of Midian (Hab 3:7; Num 12:1), so “Cush” could here extend the Moabite/Ammonite connection by referring to regions south of Judah. (4) Tribes in the Arabian Peninsula are identified as sons of Cush in Gen 10:7, but these tribes play no role in Zephaniah. (5) Cush can refer specifically to Assyria. According to Gen 10:7-8, Cush became the father of Nimrod (the mythic progenitor of Assyria). For Berlin, this option is the most likely because she sees the OAN of Zeph 2:4-15 as relying on a literary allusion to Gen 10:5-11 since the following terms appear in order: “Islands of the nations” (Gen 10:5; Zeph 2:11); Cush (Gen 10:8; Zeph 2:12); Nineveh (Gen 10:11; Zeph 2:13; see also 3:10). “Cushites, therefore, signifies not the military-political complex of Egypt, but the descendants of the forbearer of the Assyrian empire (which derives from Ham).”

See Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 111–13.

At any rate, the effects of YHWH’s actions will have a powerful influence on the distant nations to the west according to Zephaniah 2:11. This phrase offers the first of several verbal links to Genesis 10, which leads Berlin to associate the remaining OAN in Zephaniah with an allusion to Genesis 10:5-11.¹¹

The Oracle against Cush (2:12). Zephaniah 2:12 changes focus from the surrounding western (2:4-7) and eastern (2:8-11) nations to more distant nations, and while the physical location is difficult to pin down, Berlin convincingly illustrates the association of the Cushites with the descendants of Ham in Genesis 10. [Cushites in Zephaniah 2:12] It may not, thus, be entirely clear whether the compilers of 2:12 understood Cush as Ethiopia or as part of the Assyrian empire, but the specific combination does make sense as an allusion to Genesis 10:5-11. Given that Zephaniah opens with an allusion to Genesis 1 (see discussion of Zeph 1:2-3) and that the final section of

Zephaniah (3:9-20) alludes to Genesis 11 (see discussion of 3:9), it is not surprising to find the center section playing off Genesis 10.

The “killing” of the Cushites (2:12) implies piercing with a sword. The verb appears specifically with a sword (Num 19:16; Ezek 32:26) and can imply death in battle even when a sword is not specifically mentioned (Lam 4:9; 1 Sam 17:52; Jer 25:33). This language thus implies military destruction. No matter how one interprets the identity of Cush (Ethiopia or Assyria), its mention in

2:12 remains brief and leads quickly to the focus on Assyria in 2:13-15.

The Oracle against Assyria (2:13-15). The last nation mentioned in Zephaniah's oracles against foreign nations is Assyria (2:13-15). This oracle mentions both Assyria and its capital city Nineveh by name in the opening lines of 2:13. If the mention of Cush in 2:12 was intended as a cipher for Assyria, whose son Nimrod founded both Babylon (Gen 10:10) and Nineveh (Gen 10:11), then this vague reference is quickly replaced by a more specific reference to Assyria/Nineveh (2:13). Those interpreting Cush as Ethiopia, however, typically see the organizational movement as a southern to northern orientation. (Note that 2:13 alludes to the foe of the north tradition just prior to mentioning Assyria.)

At any rate, no ambiguity exists regarding the focus on Assyria in 2:13-15. The devastation in 2:13b-14 represents a poetic portrayal of desolation and depopulation. In 2:13b, Nineveh's judgment conveys a strong sense of irony in that it will become a dry, desolate wasteland, given that the Tigris River ran through the heart of the city. By contrast, the focus in 2:14 is on Nineveh as a place devoid of human population rather than a desert wasteland. The city that was once the center of military power will become a home to wild animals, and animals replace humans as inhabitants of the city. These images make little sense as literal depictions of the city, since the lack of water in 2:13b would preclude the sustenance of the animal population of 2:14 as well. Rather, the poetic combination emphasizes the complete overthrow of Nineveh as the center of arguably the most powerful military and political empire the ancient Near East had known to that point.

One sees the role of *Schadenfreude* (rejoicing in the misfortune of someone else) in Zephaniah 2:15. Assyria had been the dominant political power controlling Judah for most of the seventh century. With 2:15, one finds two points being made: human power has limits, and no one will miss Assyria when it is gone. Assyrian hegemony was so pervasive that the Assyrian kings were portrayed as greedy for power beyond measure (see Isa 10:5-11, 12-14). Their power was so impressive that only YHWH would be capable of taking them down (Isa 10:14-19). The image of people cursing Nineveh's ruins (2:15) expresses the anger of those who suffered under the tyranny of Assyrian oppression. The background of this passage reflects the events of the end of the seventh century in graphic terms. People long to see tyrants punished.

The Surprise Ending, 3:1-8

A new unit begins like a woe oracle in Zephaniah 3:1, addressed only to an unnamed city. The lack of warning creates the initial impression that 3:1 will continue the judgment against Nineveh (2:13-14). Yet once the *leaders, judges, prophets, and priests* are condemned for doing violence to *tôrâ* in 3:3-4, the reader shockingly realizes that the object of judgment is once again Jerusalem, not Nineveh. In this respect, one finds yet another parallel between Zephaniah and Amos, whose collection of OAN also surprisingly culminates by applying the final oracle to Israel itself (Amos 2:6-16).

The rhetorical flow of Zephaniah 3:1-8 unfolds relatively clearly, even though the shift in speaker from the prophet to YHWH suggests that portions of the unit may result from the combination of independent units. The unit moves from the introductory woe formula (3:1) to accusations against the city and its leaders (3:2-4). Zephaniah 3:5-7 then describes YHWH as a judge whose speech documents what he has already done to stop corruption in the city. Finally, 3:8 pronounces the verdict, introduced by “therefore” (*lākēn*) as is typical of judgment oracles. The verdict, however, also takes a thematic twist by announcing judgment against the nations.

One should not overlook how this unit is heavily laden with language of accusation. The bulk of the unit consists of language designed to make clear how Jerusalem had failed to live up to its obligations. The accusations begin with the summary against the city itself, indicting Jerusalem for its failure to seek YHWH (3:2) before turning to descriptions of the shortcomings of Jerusalem’s officials (3:3), judges (3:3), prophets (3:4), and priests (3:4). This condemnation reflects essentially the entirety of the political and religious leadership of the country. The imagery inverts the expectation of leaders as shepherds. In Zephaniah 3:3, these leaders threaten the flock rather than protect it. The political leaders are portrayed as ravenous beasts who never tire of devouring their prey. In 3:4, prophets are accused of being reckless cheats, and priests of profaning what should be holy. The common denominator of these accusations lies in the betrayal of the proper performance of their duties.

Zephaniah 3:2 accuses the whole city of having *not done* four things: not listening to a voice (from God), not accepting correction and changing its behavior, not trusting YHWH, and not

approaching God. This combination implies that YHWH's decision to destroy Jerusalem is not arbitrary. Rather, these charges imply numerous attempts by YHWH to change the city.

The words for leaders used in Zephaniah 3:3-4 (rulers, judges, prophets, and priests) are largely the words used for leaders in Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah. [Leaders in the Book of the Twelve] The terms further solidify the impression that much of the accusatory language in these four writings, in particular, deliberately demonstrates that the problems of the people involve the northern and southern kingdoms and have consistently appeared from the time of Hezekiah to Josiah. The fact that prophetic warnings were delivered to Judah for over a century suggests that, theologically speaking, the compilers of these four writings blame the people for YHWH's punishment. By reiterating the repeated confrontations of these leaders, these four writings document that the people and the leadership had been warned. The judgment against Jerusalem was no surprise, or at least should not have been if Judah had paid attention to its prophets.

The logical flow of 3:5-7 fits well with the general flow of the OAN. While the rhetorical purpose of the oracles section (2:4-15) is arranged to pronounce a shocking and powerful word of judgment against Jerusalem in 3:1-8, it is also designed as rhetorical warning of what is coming. One sees this idea expressed clearly in 3:6-7, where the destruction of the nations (3:6) serves as the final, but sadly unheeded, warning to Jerusalem.

The summation in 3:8 drives home the point of 3:1-7 but also draws from the larger context of Zephaniah 2:4–3:7. The announcement of punishment in 3:8 pronounces judgment against all the nations of the earth. Oddly, Jerusalem is included in the whole, not specified by itself. In this respect, it ties together the message of 2:4-15 and 3:1-7. Moreover, it echoes language from elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve to such a degree that one must consider this verse as a deliberate editorial link, summarizing and anticipating the fate of Jerusalem in the Book of the Twelve.

[Zephaniah 3:8 and the Book of the Twelve]

Leaders in the Book of the Twelve



The names used for leaders who are confronted provide a certain level of continuity across these four writings. They include rulers (*śar* in Hos 3:4; 5:10; 7:3, 5, 16; 8:10; 9:15; 13:10; Amos 1:15; 2:3; Mic 7:3; Zeph 1:8; 3:3); judges (Hos 7:7; 13:10; Amos 2:3; Mic 3:11; 4:3, 14; 7:3; Zeph 3:3; cf. Zech 7:9; 8:16); prophets (Hos 4:5; 6:5; 9:7f; 12:11, 14; Amos 2:11f; 3:7; 7:14; Mic 3:5-6, 11; Zeph 3:4; cf. Hab 1:1; 3:1; Hag 1:1, 3, 12; 2:1, 10; Zech 1:1, 4ff; 7:3, 7, 12; 8:9; 13:2, 4f; Mal 3:23); and priests (Hos 4:4, 6, 9; 5:1; 6:9; Amos 7:10; Mic 3:11; Zeph 1:4; 3:4; cf. Joel 1:9, 13; 2:17; Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4, 11ff; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:11, 13; 7:3, 5; Mal 1:6; 2:1, 7).

Zephaniah 3:8 and the Book of the Twelve

The literary horizon of Zeph 3:8 includes Zephaniah and beyond. It picks up language from Zephaniah: the fire of divine jealousy (1:18) that will devour the earth (1:18), which is similar to Nah 3:13. Zeph 3:8 also evokes other verbal ties to Nahum and Habakkuk: wait (Hab 2:3); gather nations and collect peoples (Hab 2:5); wrath, burning anger, and fire (Nah 1:6; see also Zeph 2:2); God's jealousy (Nah 1:2). The motifs of jealousy (*qn'*) and wrath (*z'm*) also appear in the first vision of Zechariah (see Zech 1:12–17) as YHWH puts the nations on notice that their punishment is about to begin once Jerusalem's punishment has ended. This jealousy motif in Zeph 3:8 connects as well with the verb from the same root in the pivotal verse of Joel 2:18. The purpose of this linking draws these texts together as affirmations of YHWH's intentions to punish Judah and those nations who have taken advantage of Judah in the time of its punishment. The key feature in Joel 2:18 is that YHWH's response against the nations comes after the people repent (Joel 2:12–17), which is the same dynamic that comes into play in Zechariah, where the report of the people's repentance (Zech 1:2–6) precedes Zechariah's first vision that culminates in the announcement of the end of Jerusalem's punishment and the beginning of the punishment on the nations (1:8–17). By evoking Nahum and Habakkuk, Zeph 3:8 also reminds the reader of the Book of the Twelve that Jerusalem must wait for its time of punishment before that of the nations will begin.

For further reading on the art of reading "earlier" prophetic messages, see Julia M. O'Brien, "Nahum–Habakkuk–Zephaniah: Reading the 'Former Prophets' in the Persian Period," *Int* 61 (2007): 168–83. For discussions of the redactional possibilities, see Aaron Scharf, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftenubergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998) 211–13; Jakob Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuchs. Entstehung und Komposition* (BZAW 360; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006) 226–28; and James D. Nogalski, "Zephaniah 3: A Redactional Text for a Developing Corpus," in *Schriftauslegung in der Schrift: Festschrift für Odil Hannes Steck* (BZAW 300; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000) 208–28.

The logic behind the collection of oracles in Zephaniah 2:4–3:8 coheres remarkably well. Its selection of nations anticipates judgment against those who had taken advantage of Judah during the decline of Assyria: Philistia, Ammon, and Moab (all three of whom are mentioned) fared worse with the rise of Babylon than did Edom and Phoenicia (neither of whom are mentioned). Combined with the reference to the destruction of Assyria, this collection appears to have focused on these entities, including Jerusalem, because all suffered devastating losses with the rise of Babylon. To be sure, the destruction of these nations, in a literary sense, lies in the future, but the significance of the collection is hard to ignore as reflecting the aftermath of the downfall of Assyria and its allies.

CONNECTIONS

The cumulative effect of the oracles in 2:4–3:8, when seen in light of events at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries, is noteworthy. Nineveh was the first to fall to Babylon in 612 BCE, followed by the Philistine cities in 604/603 after the battle of Carchemish in 605. Jerusalem was weakened in 598 and destroyed in 587. Ammon and Moab fell half a decade later, assuming the tradition in Josephus has some basis in actual events. Thus, the nations named in these oracles all experience dramatic reversals of

fortunes within a thirty-year period. The fact that Egypt, which was never conquered by Babylon, is not mentioned may also have relevance. While Egypt's aims of expansion into Palestine and Asia

Minor were thwarted with the defeat by Babylon at Carchemish, Egypt's retreat back to its land allowed it to regroup and withstand several attacks from Babylon. This constellation would suggest that the collection of oracles in Zephaniah would perhaps best be explained as a product of the exilic period.

Like the first (1:2–2:3) and third (3:9–14) sections of Zephaniah, the center panel (2:4–3:8) draws on a passage in Genesis 1–11. In all three instances, Zephaniah alludes to Genesis 1–11 and reverses the message of the Genesis text. Zephaniah 1:2–3 reverses the order of creation from Genesis 1 to pronounce judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, essentially placing Jerusalem's destruction on a par with the undoing of creation itself. Zephaniah 3:9, as will be seen, introduces the final section of promise by reversing the images of the tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1–9). This central section of Zephaniah alludes to Genesis 10:5–11, as noted by Berlin. Zephaniah's reversal Genesis 10:5–11 is perhaps not obvious at first glance, but the point of the table of nations is to document the origin of the line of Ham, whereas the oracles of 2:4–15 pronounce the end of this line of nations. This method of allusion cannot be accidental.

The reversal of Genesis 1–11 presupposes a structural logic for the compilers of Zephaniah. Zephaniah's content and position anticipate both the destruction of Jerusalem and its restoration. It is the last pre-exilic writing in the Twelve, which means that the remaining writings all presuppose Jerusalem's destruction. Similarly, the last three writings all presume that restoration is underway. Zephaniah anticipates both themes. The allusions to Genesis 1–11 underscore how powerful Jerusalem's destruction and restoration were for those compiling prophetic literature.

Anticipation of Jerusalem's destruction as the day of YHWH also marks 3:1–8 as the dramatic conclusion to Zephaniah's OAN. In doing so, this passage plays a powerful role for the growing collection of writings and the final form of the Book of the Twelve. Since Zephaniah is the last pre-exilic prophet in the corpus, it provides opportunity for theological reflection on the effect of Assyria's downfall from the perspective of Josiah's time. The picture it presents does not, however, merely rejoice at the downfall of a hated oppressor, even though such sentiments do present themselves. Rather, the culmination of the oracles returns to where Zephaniah began—the imminent destruction of Judah and Jerusalem as the

work of YHWH. As such, Zephaniah marks a pivotal juncture in the Twelve as it presents a prophetic commentary on the history of Judah: Jerusalem's destruction will come because it did not accept the warning sent through genuine prophets. YHWH could no longer ignore that corruption that consumed its political leaders, its judges, its prophets, and its priests. Fortunately, Zephaniah 3:1-8 is not the end of the story for Zephaniah or the Book of the Twelve.

Manifest Destiny

Manifest destiny represents the idea that God has ordained that America should extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific, giving permission to those on God's side to clear out those things that stand in the way of God's plan. The image here, a widely distributed painting by John Gast called *Spirit of the Frontier* (1872), illustrates this idea vividly. As the deity leads settlers west, she brings the light with her to the land that is dark. While few today would find compelling that God commands America to expand, manifest destiny was used to create public policies that led, positively, to the settlement and the integration of the American west, but also, negatively, to the annihilation of Native American peoples, the decimation of bison herds, and other abuses of the land.



John Gast (1842–?). *American Progress* (also known as *Spirit of the Frontier*) (1872). Oil on canvas. Museum of the American West, Los Angeles CA. (Credit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:American_progress.JPG)

Modern communities of faith do not always pause and reflect deeply on their own theology (or theologies) of history that shape how they view the world. The operative theologies tend to claim mystical connections, evoke superficial aphorisms, or respond to an imminent threat. In the past, American Christian communities have often drawn on biblical eschatological promises in ways that tend to assume America parallels Israel as a chosen nation, a nation chosen by God for blessings in mystical ways. In the nineteenth century, for instance, these assumptions led to public policies such as manifest destiny that drove American expansionism at all costs. By contrast, Zephaniah's message to YHWH's people includes Judah among the nations whom God will punish.

Superficial assumptions about God's role in history often find their way into our communal discourse as well. After a big win in a college football game, the coach speaks of "fate" being on his team's side. Athletes cross the goal line and kneel down to "give Jesus the credit" for their success. Does God really care who wins a sports contest? Zephaniah's portrayal of God's anticipated intervention

does not focus on such trivialities. It confronts communities for the lack of righteousness and humility (2:3), for the failure to draw near to God (3:8), and for allowing religious and political leaders to take advantage of the righteous (3:3-4). These charges are collective and affect the character of the entire country. It is hard not to draw comparisons to our own system where we have effectively institutionalized bribery in the form of lobbyists who pedal influence to both sides of the political fence in order to benefit themselves or the companies they represent. Our political leaders then try to convince themselves that the money from lobbyists has no influence on their voting decisions.

A third way wherein theologies of history affect our public life often comes in the form of responses to imminent threats, or those perceived as such. From Pearl Harbor to 9-11, America seldom lacks those who seek to turn actual attacks into causes for divine retribution. When, as in these two instances, attacks from outside forces threaten lives and our way of life, it is no wonder that people want to know, “Where is God in this situation?” Uncritical acceptance of calls to take up the sword in the name of God, however, can have terrible consequences. No one ever goes to war thinking that God is fighting for the other side. Yet, that is precisely the message of Zephaniah to Judah in 3:1-8. Zephaniah’s OAN—set in the time of Josiah (639–608) according to 1:1—“literarily” anticipate the downfall of Assyria and its allies, including Judah. Biblical prophets are often characterized as those who speak truth to power and as those who challenge the king’s claims of divine prerogatives.

The theology of history for most communities of faith is more often assumed from our surrounding culture rather than sought through theological reflection. Often missing as a result is the question, “Where is God directing history?” Rather than mystical assumptions about our role as God’s chosen nation, we should reflect on how we should use our blessings as a nation to accomplish justice. We should ask how communities of faith can enhance the search for genuine righteousness in society. Our communities of faith should challenge politicians who try to manipulate people using religious language. These are prophetic responses to the question of God’s role in history.

NOTES

1. See Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 99.

2. So Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micah–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephania* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975) 299; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 197–98.

3. See Berlin's report of an unpublished paper by Robert Haak (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 98–99).

4. See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 288. Sennacherib claims he gave Hezekiah's territory to Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza.

5. These cities are also mentioned in two other places (Jer 25:20 and Zech 9:5-6), both of which list them in yet another order: Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod.

6. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 130. Sweeney appears to imply that the judgment of 2:5-7, then, would bypass the Judeans living in the area.

7. See, however, Sweeney for the counter-argument (*Zephaniah*, 131–32). Given the identification of the impending day of YHWH with the destruction of Judah implied by so much of 1:2–2:3, Sweeney's arguments become less convincing.

8. See the treatment by Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 134–44. Sweeney traces a lengthy and complex series of events back to the ninth century. His explanations are tenuous, though, because he cannot adequately explain the disaster suffered by Judah that is implied in 2:9-11.

9. See discussion of recent trends in Pentateuchal studies in Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, (trans. James D. Nogalski; Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Bible 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), especially pages 237–59. Several recent treatments date the combination of Genesis and the ancestral narratives with the exodus story to the exilic period and beyond. Schmid dates this combination to the first half of the fifth century. The Sodom and Gomorrah story and the story of the seduction of Lot would, in all likelihood, have been combined well before this time.

10. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 134.

11. Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 111–13.

RESTORATION OF THE NATIONS AND JUDAH

Zephaniah 3:9-20

COMMENTARY

Both the theme and the unit markers change beginning with 3:9. The theme changes dramatically from judgment to promise, and several notable introductory formulas (in 3:11, 16, 19, 20) combined with changes of addressee (3:14) provide this passage with the character of a series of promise sayings (3:9-10, 11-13, 14-15, 16-18, 19, 20). Some of these elements are more closely connected to one another than others, however, suggesting that the growth of Zephaniah 3:9-20 happened in more than one phase.¹ Still, its compilation did not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it draws on the rest of Zephaniah, on other parts of the developing corpus of the Book of the Twelve, and, notably, on Genesis 11 for its literary horizon. Its purpose is clear: Zephaniah 3:9-20 offers a positive message of hope to those who have endured the destruction of Jerusalem but who continue to believe that YHWH has a place for Jerusalem and Judah after the destruction.

Reversing the Story of Babel, 3:9-10

Zephaniah 3:9-10 changes course dramatically from the judgment against Jerusalem and the nations to a message of hope that foreigners from the nations will bring offerings to YHWH in Jerusalem. For the third time in Zephaniah, a major structural clue to the writing draws on a text in Genesis 1–11 as a foil. Zephaniah 1:2-3 began with a message of judgment whose allusive language reversed the order of the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1 while evoking the flood story. The second occurrence appeared in the allusions to Genesis 10:5-12 in Zephaniah 2:11-13, which in turn changed the birth announcements of the line of Japheth and Ham into announce-

ments of this line's destruction. Zephaniah 3:9-10, however, introduces the theme of promise to Zion with an oblique allusion to Genesis 11:1-9 that reverses language from the tower of Babel story in order to offer words of restoration for the world and Jerusalem.

The allusion is based on a lexical playfulness in which in both texts (Gen 11:1, 6, 7, 9 and Zeph 3:9) use the verbal root "to scatter" (*pûš*) to convey the theme of many languages out of one language, and both use the term "lip" to mean language.² Moreover, both texts play with repeating consonants to emphasize how YHWH's action affects human language. In Genesis 11, YHWH's action results in the confusion of speech using a wordplay on Babylon (*bābel*) by speaking of the language that becomes confused (*bālal*). By contrast, Zephaniah 3:9 plays off the confused speech by promising the "speech of the peoples" will be changed to pure speech (*šāfāh bē'rûrâh*), changing from the root *bll* (confuse) to *brr* (pure) in order to achieve the wordplay. The scattering of the people using the verbal root *pûš* appears as the punishment in Genesis 11:8-9 and in the reference to the exiles in Zephaniah 3:10. The upshot of these allusions is that Zephaniah reverses the stories marking either end of Genesis 1–11. The "undoing of creation" (1:3) as a way of speaking about judgment against Judah and Jerusalem is balanced by the "undoing of Babel" as a promise of pure speech to the nations.

In 3:10, Cush is generally interpreted as Ethiopia (see NRSV), but several scholars argue that it alludes to a "rivers-of-paradise" motif from Genesis 2:13 (the same Cush mentioned in Gen 10:6-8; see the discussion of Zeph 2:12). Berlin sees Cush in 2:12 as a reference to the Mesopotamian descendant of Nimrod based on Genesis 10:5-11, and she argues that 3:10 intends the same "Cush."³ For her, the distance of this Cush makes the promise more powerful than when this place name is equated with Ethiopia. One could argue that the direction also makes more sense. As an oblique allusion to exiles in Mesopotamia, the promise becomes more poignant.

The phrases "Daughter of my dispersed ones," and "my worshipers," are often taken as problematic because interpreters are not certain how to understand "daughter" in 3:10. [Translation of Zephaniah 3:10] Actually, the MT makes sense if "Daughter of my dispersed ones" is treated as a vocative referring to Lady Zion, while "my worshipers" are the subject of the plural verb. The "Daughter of my

Translation of Zephaniah 3:10

ΑΩ Most modern and ancient translations do not understand Zion as “Daughter of my dispersed ones” in Zeph 3:10. Rather, most see the term as a synonym to “my worshipers,” or ignore the word “daughter” entirely. However, when one understands “Daughter of my dispersed ones” as a synonym to “daughter Zion” who is named explicitly in 3:14, then one understands that she is also the addressee of these verses rather than a synonym for “worshipers” who “will bring my offering.” The verse becomes much clearer, and the 2fs language of 3:11-13 also makes sense. Zeph 3:10 becomes a promise to *Lady Zion* (*bat šyôn*) that the exiles will return to Jerusalem with offerings.

MT: From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshipers will bring my offering, O Daughter of my dispersed ones.

ESV: From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.

NAS: From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my worshipers, my dispersed ones, will bring my offerings.

NIV: From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.

NRSV: From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suplicants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering.

KJV: From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suplicants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.

NET: From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, those who pray to me will bring me tribute.

LXX English: From the boundaries of the rivers of Ethiopia will I receive my dispersed ones; they shall offer sacrifices to me.

Of course, this promise presumes the exile has occurred and that (from the perspective of the literary setting of Zephaniah) both the exile and the return will occur in the future. This text, however, has a long history of scholarship treating it as a postexilic text. The fact that the vocative “Daughter-of-my-Dispersed Ones” interrupts the plural subject (“my worshipers”) and the verb (“will bring”) creates the confusion. It may represent a gloss whereby the phrase was added to attach it to 3:11-13, but the vocative could also be placed at the end of the phrase for emphasis.

dispersed ones” accounts for the second feminine singular address beginning in 3:11, and her identity is clarified explicitly in 3:14 as Lady Zion. Thus, the metaphor emphasizes those who have been dispersed. Lady Zion is the mother of Jerusalem’s citizens, and the phrase “dispersed ones” here refers to that group (or those groups) who have vacated her space.

The phrase “Rivers of Cush” has been taken by many as an allusion to Isaiah 18, where it refers to Ethiopia/Egypt.⁴ Because of Isaiah 18:1, one cannot entirely rule out Egypt as the intended meaning of Zephaniah 3:10, but Berlin’s arguments are stronger that in Zephaniah 2:12 and 3:10 Cush makes better sense as distant portions of Mesopotamia associated with paradise. Even if it refers to Egypt, 3:10 still makes sense, given that Egypt was the destination of the “exiles” who fled the Babylonians after the events of 587 BCE (see 2 Kgs 25:22-26; Jer 41:1–43:13.) In any reading, however, 3:10 presumes an awareness of the Diaspora and promises that those living in exile will bring offerings to Jerusalem. Conceptualizing 3:10 as a seventh-century statement remains problematic in spite of some recent attempts to understand it in that way.

The Surviving Remnant, 3:11-13

The second part of this section, 3:11-13, moves rhetorically from the cessation of punishment to the characterization of those punished (3:11) and those who survive (3:12-13). The unit promises Zion that, once the arrogant have been removed, a humble remnant will remain and will be free to live honorably before YHWH.

The second feminine singular references in 3:11-13 address a singular feminine entity that can only be interpreted as a proleptic reference to Lady Zion, who has already appeared with a synonymous designation in 3:10 but who is not specifically mentioned until 3:14. Zephaniah 3:11 assumes that the judgment of purification has occurred, eliminating the arrogant who had been the subject of judgment elsewhere in Zephaniah. For example, in Zephaniah 1:12, YHWH targets those who doubt YHWH's power. Second, though it never uses the word "arrogant," Zephaniah 3:2-7 describes arrogant people as those who do not accept correction and refuse to draw near to YHWH. In essence, the arrogant are the polar opposite of the "humble of the land" mentioned in 2:3.

The second feminine singular addressee continues in 3:12, and the promise of a humble remnant reflects the flip side, thematically, of the judgment against the arrogant mentioned in 3:11. The action of this remnant is summarized as "seeking refuge in the name of YHWH," while a more delineated perspective of what that means appears in 3:13.

The phrase "humble and lowly" is unique in the Old Testament, though these words do appear elsewhere in poetic parallelism (Ps 82:3; Prov 22:22). Both "humble" (8:4) and "lowly" (2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:6) appear in Amos, albeit in a slightly different form. It is difficult, then, to argue that Zephaniah 3:12 intentionally echoes the language of Amos. Zephaniah 3:12 does, however, convey accusations that, as in Amos, the poor, the humble, and the weak suffer at the hands of their own people in their own land. The purification assumed in 3:11-13 eliminates the callous, the arrogant, and the rebellious. This purification is designed to leave a remnant, creating a thematic parallel in the first redactional promise at the end of Amos, where the destruction of Israel (9:7-8a) eliminates all the sinners so that only a remnant remains (9:8b-10).

The phrase “remnant of Israel” in 3:13 is unexpected. It does not appear elsewhere in Zephaniah, but does appear in Micah 2:12 as a promise to *Judah*. A remnant is mentioned in Zephaniah 2:7 (remnant of the house of Judah) and 2:9 (remnant of my people), and it is probably best to understand remnant of Israel in this sense, especially since 2:9 begins with a reference to the “God of Israel” who speaks of the “remnant of my people.”

The desired behavior of the remnant is ethical in nature. The omission of wrongdoing and lying are the critical pieces of evidence to distinguish the true remnant (who will be delivered) from the arrogant (who will have been punished). By contrast, most of the accusatory language in Zephaniah 1–2 concerned the use of wealth or improper worship. On the other hand, the picture of the remnant works much better as the result of judgment against those mentioned in Micah, where the inhabitants are accused of lying and deception (6:12) and wrongdoing (3:10).

Zephaniah 3:13 perhaps evokes images found elsewhere in the Philistine oracle (2:4-7), where a remnant from Judah that seeks YHWH will shepherd the flock and lie down in a land vacated by the Philistines (see 2:7). In this promise, then, one finds a connection to the time of security presupposed in the Philistine oracle.

Rejoice, Lady Zion, 3:14-17

The third unit, Zephaniah 3:14-15, continues the second feminine singular address to Lady Zion, and is coherent thematically and structurally. It begins with a command to sing, and whereas the previous verses describe judgment against the haughty and the nature of the remnant, these verses focus on Zion’s response to the cessation of judgment. Moreover, the previous units were divine speeches, but both 3:14-15 and 3:16-17 speak of YHWH in the third person, meaning these verses constitute prophetic speech.

This unit breaks into two parts (3:14-15, 16-17). Although set apart from one another formally by the introductory formula “on that day” (*bayôm hahû*) in 3:16, the tight chiasmic structure of the two parts makes it highly unlikely that the two sections can be seen as independent of one another. [The Chiasmic Structure of 3:14-17] Readers should notice, though, that the nature of the threat of judgment in 3:14-17 is the removal of enemies. This differs from the judgment in 3:11-13 in which the threat was internal (the arrogant). Thus,

The Chiastic Structure of 3:14-17



The chiasmic movement of thought in Zeph 3:14-17 is readily apparent:

- A—Rejoice, Zion, YHWH has withdrawn judgment (3:14-15a)
- B—King YHWH is in your midst (3:15bα)
- C—Do not fear Zion (3:15bβ)
- C'—"Do not fear!" Jerusalem will be told (3:16)
- B'—Warrior YHWH is in your midst (3:17a)
- A'—YHWH will rejoice over you, Zion (3:17b)

one needs to understand this saying in 3:14-15 as independent of the previous verses, even though the *logic of its placement* after 3:11-13 makes sense. Once the punishment (purification) of Jerusalem has occurred and a holy remnant remains, YHWH's protection of Jerusalem against the nations can resume. Hence, the judgment of Jerusalem presumed in 3:1-7, once completed, leads to the promise of YHWH's return and the punishment of the nations.

Moreover, 3:15 contains a second promise—the presence of YHWH as King in Jerusalem. This promise has implications when read against Jerusalem's destruction in the developing corpus. On the one hand, its message of security stands out and fits the general tenor of 3:9-20. On the other hand, speaking about YHWH as

King in Jerusalem and as the guarantor of that security suggests that something has changed. While the first section of Zephaniah critiqued the royal household for incorporating foreign elements into Judah (1:8), Zephaniah 3:9-20 implies no role for a Davidic king in Zion's restoration.⁵ [YHWH as King]

Zephaniah 3:16 repeats the call for the cessation of fear. The statements in 3:17 provide the rationale for Jerusalem's joy: the protection and favor of YHWH. With YHWH's presence in Jerusalem, no foe can prevail and victory is assured. YHWH's rejoicing over Jerusalem implies YHWH's acceptance of her. These promises imply Jerusalem is now fit to be re-inhabited by YHWH, who will keep her safe from future attack. [Translating Zephaniah 3:17]

YHWH as King



The image of YHWH returning as king also manifests parallels to other Old Testament texts. The book of Ezekiel depicts both YHWH's departure (10:1-5; 11:22-25) and YHWH's return (43:1-5) to Jerusalem and the temple as signs of judgment and restoration, but it speaks of the glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH rather than YHWH as King. By contrast, the collection and arrangement of Psalms makes a decided move away from a human king to YHWH as King in books 4–5 (90–105; 106–150).

See Gerald H. Wilson, "King, Messiah, and the Reign of God: Revisiting the Royal Psalms and the Shape of the Psalter," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. Peter W. Flint and Patric D. Miller, Jr.; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 391–93.

Translating Zephaniah 3:17

AS The promise translated in 3:17, "YHWH will renew his love," is an emendation in the NRSV (and NET) based on the LXX reading. The LXX reading translates the root *ḥdš* while MT has the root *ḥrś* (which means to be silent). Since it is not clear whether the LXX contains a different text or is trying to smooth over an unknown idiom, other English translations follow MT, providing something like "he will quiet you with his love." The

anthropomorphic language for YHWH in this passage describes YHWH as warrior, rejoicing as one who rejoices "on a day of festival." Following the LXX, the NRSV thus continues the thought of 3:17 with the first words of 3:18, but there are good reasons to assume that the LXX is smoothing a difficult phrase. Most English translations follow MT here and treat the end of 3:17 as the end of the sentence (see 3:18).

From Shame to Renown, 3:18-20

The NRSV offers a misleading translation of Zephaniah 3:18. A more literal rendering can be offered that still makes sense of the verse as *anticipating* the end of punishment: “I will gather from you those grieving over the appointed feasts. They have been a burden against her, a reproach.” The verse is not a promise of the end of disaster (as implied by the NRSV), but of the end to mourning over the disaster. This verse thus assumes that a lengthy period of devastation has preceded the promise of restoration. The restoration also anticipates an end to mourning over Jerusalem. As such, it foreshadows the situation that frames the collection of sayings in Zechariah 7–8, where the narrative report (7:1-3; 8:18) refers to fasts of mourning during the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months. These festivals mark key events in the destruction of Jerusalem and the occupation of the land (see [Exilic Fast Days] in Zech 7:3).

With Zephaniah 3:19, the promise to Zion continues, but it turns its attention to the oppressors and those who have survived. The verse offers a revised version of Micah 4:6-7 and identifies three groups whose status will be changed when YHWH acts to restore Zion in the near future: her oppressors, the lame, and the outcast. [Zephaniah 3:19 and the Use of Micah 4:6-7] The oppressors are foreign nations, while the lame and the outcasts refer respectively to those who survived Jerusalem’s destruction and those exiled.

References to “at that time” (3:19, 20) and to “the time” (3:20) of gathering provide three unusual instances of “the time” in the promises of restoration. These appear to be a deliberate foreshadowing of three equally unusual references to the “time” in Haggai 1:2, 4. [Repeated “Time” Triplets] Of course, these “times” are deliberately juxtaposed, as in some other connections between the endings and beginnings of other writings in the Book of the Twelve. While Zephaniah 3:18-20 anticipates a glorious time of restoration, Haggai begins the time of restoration in the Book of the Twelve on a much less auspicious note. In Zephaniah, “the time” implies an almost utopian ideal of restoration, homecoming, and protection from YHWH. In Haggai, however, that time of restoration lacks food and employment because of the land’s infertility; and it lacks a temple for YHWH’s dwelling.

Zephaniah 3:19 and the Use of Micah 4:6-7



Zeph 3:18-19 draws on an intricate interplay and adaptation of Mic 4:6-7 in a way that helps one to identify the groups mentioned and to convey a sense that the restoration appears closer in Zephaniah than in Micah. While some might prefer to interpret the connections as merely a loose echo, a series of observations suggest the changes from Mic 4:6-7 in Zeph 3:18-19 are deliberate and meaningful.

Mic 4:6-7

⁶On that day, says YHWH, I will deliver *the lame and gather the outcast* and those whom I have treated badly.

⁷And I will make the lame a remnant and the castoffs into a mighty nation. And YHWH will reign over them on Mount Zion from now into perpetuity.

Zeph 3:19-20

¹⁹Behold, what I am about to do to all your oppressors in that time. I will deliver *the lame and the outcast I will gather*. I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰In that time, I will bring all of you *back*, in the time when I gather you, for I will make you into renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your possessions before your eyes, says the LORD.

Given the shared language, several scholars of late have noted that the verses share a broader literary horizon in the developing corpus. In turn, these links allow one to identify the lame, the outcast, and the oppressors. First, the verb “gather” is used in Zeph 3:18 for those grieving, while Mic 4:6 uses it for the lame. It makes sense to equate these two groups metaphorically, since the hobbled (lame) would be injured and unable to go far. Thus, the lame would be those in the land who had suffered with Jerusalem’s destruction. By contrast, the outcast would include exiles and refugees

from a distance. Second, the Hebrew verbs show subtle but clear changes between the two passages so that Zeph 3:19 implies more imminent action, one more suited to its position as the last “pre-exilic” writing in the Book of the Twelve. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi presume the exiles have returned. Note especially the participle “behold, I” followed by a participle that begins Zeph 3:19, a formulation that implies imminent future (see GKZ §116p on the *futurum instans*). Third, the surrounding material in 3:20 and the chronological marker of 3:19 appear to anticipate the threefold use of “time” in Hag 1, further suggesting that the links in these verses draw deliberately from the extended context of the Twelve rather than from Zephaniah alone. Finally, the term “oppressors” has sometimes been mistakenly understood as a reference to an inner-Judean group, but the plural term makes better sense as a reference to *all* of the external forces who have taken advantage of Judah’s situation during the exile. This would certainly include Babylon and the nations mentioned in Zephaniah’s oracles against foreign nations (2:4-15). One might even suggest that this reference anticipates the first vision of Zechariah (1:8-17), where the restoration of Zion provides the fulcrum point for YHWH’s punishment of the nations.

Even the thematic changes in 3:19-20 reflect the Zephaniah setting. The promise in Mic 4:6 refers to disaster that YHWH will bring, while Zeph 3:19-20 presumes disaster has occurred but speaks of YHWH turning *shame* into renown. The promise that YHWH will reign as king on Mount Zion (Mic 4:7) has already occurred with Zeph 3:15, which explains the language in Zeph 3:20 that anticipates YHWH *bringing* the lame and outcast *back* to Zion.

See the more detailed analysis in James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors of the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 209–11.

CONNECTIONS

Two issues play heavily on how one interprets this passage: Lady Zion and the language of utopian eschatology. First, much of Zephaniah 3:9-20 conveys a message of hope for Lady Zion, a character who appears in prophetic texts with some regularity but is only recently receiving the attention she deserves. [Lady Zion in Zephaniah 3] The title Lady Zion (*bat šyryôn*) typically personifies

Repeated "Time" Triplets



The triple use of the word "time" in close proximity is not common and creates awkward redundancy in the syntax, as evidenced by the fact that the NRSV omits one occurrence of "time" in Hag 1:2 for stylistic reasons (compare NAS and NRSV). Nevertheless, "time" appears three times in Zeph 3:19-20 and in Hag 1:2-4:

Zephaniah 3:19-20 NRSV

¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors **at that time**. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰**At that time** I will bring you home, **at that time** when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Zephaniah 3:19-20 (NAS)

¹⁹"Behold, I am going to deal **at that time** With all your oppressors, I will save the lame And gather the outcast, And I will turn their shame into praise and renown In all the earth. ²⁰"**At that time** I will bring you in, **Even at that time** when I gather you together; Indeed, I will give you renown and praise Among all the peoples of the earth, When I restore your fortunes before your eyes," Says the LORD.

While the word "time" is not uncommon, it appears nowhere else three times in two verses, except in the adjacent texts at the end of Zephaniah and the beginning of Haggai.

Haggai 1:2-4 (NRSV)

²Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say **the time** has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. ³Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ⁴Is it **a time** for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

Haggai 1:2-4 (NAS)

²Thus says the LORD of hosts, "This people says, '**The time** has not come, **even the time** for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.'" ³ Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, ⁴"Is it **time** for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?"

Jerusalem. However, the prominence of this character should not be downplayed.

The personification of Lady Zion allows her to appear alongside YHWH and the people, and it allows her to be addressed in a personal, often tender fashion. As a personification of the city, she is both an individual and a collective entity. Her character is portrayed positively in some texts as wife and mother. As the wife of YHWH in these metaphors, she can speak to YHWH in ways that humans cannot. As mother, her children are the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They look to her for protection and sustenance. Her actions may convey the state of the city (as in much of Lamentations), or she can intercede for her children.

The rich variety of images provides a backdrop against which Zephaniah 3:9-20 should be heard because of Lady Zion's prominence. She is called by another name in 3:10, "Daughter of My Dispersed Ones," in a text that simultaneously implies that her children are YHWH's children. Her children have been "purified" by judgment so that only the humble remain (3:11-12). This humble remnant will do what the nation as a whole would not do

Lady Zion in Zephaniah 3



The role of Jerusalem personified as Lady Zion represents an important concept in prophetic literature that is often overlooked. Like the personified land of Hos 2, Lady Zion can also be portrayed negatively as a prostitute or as an adulteress when the judgment of Jerusalem is under discussion. Lady Zion's character is more fully developed in Isaiah. For example, Isa 49:14-23 demonstrates the broad range of relationships she can convey. Following a promise from YHWH to bring the people home and comfort them (49:8-13), a report of Lady Zion's confrontation with YHWH begins with a charge from her that YHWH, her husband, has abandoned her (49:14). This charge could not be leveled as shockingly by anyone else in the constellation of prophetic characters appearing in prophetic texts. She accuses YHWH of abandoning her, of becoming a dead-beat dad. The charge is immediately refuted by YHWH, who compares himself to a nursing mother to show the depth of love for Zion: "Can a woman forget her nursing

child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you [2fs]" (49:15). He goes on to tell her, essentially, that he has tattooed her on his hand so that she is always present with him (49:16). He then describes the beauty of her walls and her rapid rebuilding in terms of the festal bridal clothing that she will wear like jewelry (49:16-18). Soon, YHWH tells her, her children will return and be so numerous that they will need more space (49:20). She will be astonished that someone else has raised her children (49:21), but that now her sons and daughters will be returned to her and she will again receive the honor due her (49:22-23).

For further reading, see the bibliographical material and the discussions in **[Cities Personified]** in Hos 2:1-5 and **[Jerusalem Personified]** in the introduction to Micah. See as well the discussions of Mic 7:8-10; Zech 1:12-17; and 9:9-13.

earlier, namely seek YHWH (2:1-3). As a result, Lady Zion is commanded to sing and rejoice (3:14, 17) and to take courage (3:15, 16). Her king returns and promises to protect her from her enemies (3:15, 19) and to bring home the inhabitants (3:19). He will remove her shame (3:18) and show his love to her (3:17). To be sure, Lady Zion is presented more passively in this text than in Isaiah 49:8-13, but the text's tenor is that of joy, the joy of restored relationships with YHWH and with her children.

These images of Lady Zion have both positive and negative potential as symbols for communities of faith today. Recovering aspects of the personified Lady Zion as representing Jerusalem could perhaps reshape some of the more strident debates about the role of Jerusalem in today's political discussions about the future of the city in a two-state dialogue. But to do so would require admitting that the children of Lady Zion today, over whom she watches, are not the same as those of postexilic Judah. How does one convince warring factions that Zion should be seen as the mother of all her children, and that the prosperity of all her children is her legitimate concern? At this point in time, Zion's children are fighting among themselves for the right to possess her.

The negative use of this symbol of Zion personified is, unfortunately, too readily documented in the history of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic attitudes toward the city. Supercessionist tendencies in

Christian communities frequently result in attempts to understand Zion in purely spiritualized terms as the church. Picking up on Pauline imagery of the church as the bride of Christ, Zion has been used poetically in Christian contexts as a synonym for the church. There is a certain poetic sense in which this can prove to be a powerful poetic symbol in Christian communities of faith (e.g., in hymns). However, the poetic nature of this symbolism is often lost when Zion is mentioned in congregational settings, and the image has been co-opted more than once in the church's history when the idea of Christian control of Jerusalem became an issue. Powerful hymns like Isaac Watts's "Marching to Zion" speak of spiritual quests, but when such imagery is taken literally, as in the Crusades of the Middle Ages or today's battles between Jews and Palestinians, the goal of possessing Zion assumes she is something to be conquered rather than embraced. Recovering the imagery of Lady Zion as mother would involve reminding religious groups (Christians, Jews, and Muslims) that Zion belongs to God and that she seeks the benefit of her children.

Utopian imagery constitutes a second thematic concept in this passage. Zephaniah 3:9-20 envisions a truly idyllic time of purified restoration. Unlike 1:1-3:8, which anticipates a time of judgment, the time of judgment is past in 3:9-20, and a remnant remains in Zion. Zephaniah 3:9-10 implies that the purpose of restoration is the reversal of the tower of Babel story so that all nations will serve YHWH. In 3:11-13, the arrogant are replaced by the humble. The city has been punished so that the arrogant and haughty have been banished; in other words, the city has been purified of the elements that necessitated judgment. In 3:14-17, YHWH returns as king and promises to protect Jerusalem. This warrior-king promises the removal of all the oppressors. Joy and singing permeate the atmosphere of the city. In 3:18-20, Zion's fate will be restored and its people returned. YHWH will bring back those who suffered through the destruction and those who were expelled from the city.

As important as these images are in 3:9-20, one should also note what is not promised. With YHWH as king, there is no need for another monarch. There is no promise of restoration for the Davidic king. In 3:9-20, there will be no foreigners occupying the land because they too will serve YHWH. Zephaniah 3:9-20 thus provides a kind of literary marker of what restoration *should* look like according to the compilers of the Book of the Twelve (though

Utopian Visions



America, especially in the nineteenth century, has had a long history of utopian movements that establish communities for the purpose of changing society or awaiting some great eschatological ideal. Many of these communities drew on religious idealism, but some formed their communities for purely political reasons. Examples of the former would include Brook Farm (established by transcendentalists in the 1840s), New Harmony, Indiana (begun in the 1820s by universalist preacher George Rapp and later modified by the industrialist Robert Owen), the Oneida Community (formed in New York in the late 1840s), the Amana Colonies (founded in the 1850s in Iowa), and the Shaker communities of New York and Kentucky (which existed in some form from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century). An example of a utopian group (that still exists) that combined religious and political concerns could be Koinonia Farm in Gerogia, based upon the teaching of Jesus and founded by Clarence Jordan in 1942 to combat racism. The stories of these groups are fascinating to consider and are easily available on the Internet. Cumulatively, they should serve as a reminder that the human condition both desires to create a perfect environment and makes such a utopia unattainable.

its composition likely begins with the corpus of Hosea–Amos–Micah–Zephaniah).⁶ The passage transforms the image of Jerusalem into a vision of utopian proportions.

Utopian visions, however, never come true, at least not in any literal sense. [Utopian Visions] Why, then, were so many utopian ideals incorporated into Zephaniah 3? Were the compilers misguided in their hopes, or worse, were their expectations delusional? Did they really think Jerusalem would become heaven on earth? To understand these eschatological promises, one must first come to terms with how they function.

As powerful as these utopian images are, there are good reasons to suspect that the compilers were quite cognizant of how different the picture they painted of Jerusalem was from the reality of the city they knew. One can see this historically and canonically. Historically, mounting evidence (literary and archaeological) suggests that Jerusalem in the Persian period was a small, relatively insignificant portion of the empire.⁷ It is rarely mentioned in Persian

sources. Its occupation offered strategic advantages to the Persians, but Jerusalem needed Persian resources more than Persia needed Judah. Canonically, Persian period narratives depict the time as one of great potential that continually encounters obstacles. The temple is rebuilt, but it is so much smaller that the older members of society weep (Ezra 3:12). Ezra and Nehemiah face mounting pressures from within their own community as they try to stabilize society. Whether describing attacks from neighboring countries, debates among various groups within the land, or agricultural disasters, events in the Persian period would never fulfill the promises described in Zephaniah 3:9-20. The promises of those verses will never be fulfilled literally.

So why do these and other eschatological promises occupy such a prominent place at the end of so many of the prophetic writings if they were not intended to describe literal events? In a word, hope. In times of devastation, when reality looks bleak, the communities

of faith for whom these texts were collected did not need to be told how bad things could get. They needed assurance that things would look better soon. They needed to know that YHWH had not abandoned them. They needed assurance that exile was not the last word. They needed to think that life would be different. Because the devastation was so severe, hope needed to be writ large. It was not enough to promise that exiles would return; they had to sense they would be protected when they arrived. They had to be encouraged not to fear. They had to know the disaster had finally passed. Like many happy endings in Hollywood films, hope at the end of a writing provides a sense of courage and direction, even when moviegoers know the story never happened or that things do not usually work out so neatly in “reality.” Eschatological hope was not powerful because life turned out that way. It was powerful because it provided a hopeful way to see life in the present as they were on the way to something better.

NOTES

1. James D. Nogalski, “Zephaniah 3: A Redactional Text for a Developing Corpus,” in *Schriftauslegung in der Schrift: Festschrift for Odil Hannes Steck* (BZAW 300; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000) 207–18.

2. See Julia O’Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 123. I am indebted to the observations of one of my students, Ginny Brewer-Boydston, for drawing my attention to this wordplay.

3. Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 134.

4. Odil Hannes Steck, “Zu Zeph 3:9-10,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 34 (1990): 90–95.

5. For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Paul L. Redditt, “The King in the Book of the Twelve,” in *Tradition in Transition* (ed. Mark J. Boda and Michael H. Floyd; LHB/OTS; London: T & T Clark International, 2008) 74–76.

6. See discussion of the redactional growth of the corpus in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this volume.

7. Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Lester L. Grabbe, *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah, vol. 1 of A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (Library of Second Temple Studies 47; London: T & T Clark, 2004).

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HAGGAI

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

Dating the Prophet and the Book

Haggai is one of the few Old Testament books where one finds a significant consensus on the date of the prophet and the book that bears his name. [Haggai in Jewish Tradition] This consensus rises from the most prominent structural feature of the book: the specific dates listing the prophet's appearance, which appear regularly and in chronological order throughout this short book (1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20). These chronological markers date the messages to particular days during the fall of 520 BCE (see the discussion of 1:1). In addition to these precise dating formulas, the content of Haggai predominantly centers on the prophet's successful efforts to energize Jerusalem's leadership and populace in order to rebuild the temple. This topic coincides with the dates listed.

This widespread agreement, however, does not mean the setting is without problems. The biggest question revolves around how to understand the book of Haggai in relationship to the role of the prophet Haggai (and Zechariah) as presented in the book of Ezra. Zerubbabel, the Persian appointed governor, and Joshua, the high priest, play prominent roles in Haggai and Zechariah. They, along with Haggai and Zechariah, also play significant roles in the narrative account of Ezra, but correlating the two traditions creates difficulties. In the prophetic books, the speeches of Haggai and Zechariah (addressed to Joshua and Zerubbabel) are dated during the

Haggai in Jewish Tradition



Rabbinic tradition provides several recurring motifs regarding Haggai. Haggai is, of course, credited with helping to instigate work on the temple, but Haggai hardly ever appears alone in rabbinic tradition. Usually, Haggai appears in conjunction with Zechariah and Malachi. According to the rabbis, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were among the band of returnees with Ezra, with each having a special role. Haggai showed the people the plan of the altar, which was larger than the one that had been in Solomon's temple. Zechariah showed the people the location of the altar. Malachi showed them that they had to bring sacrifices even before the completion of the temple. Another recurring motif is the idea that prophecy in the postexilic period is in some way inferior to preexilic prophecy. Rarely are reasons given, but at least one place suggests the reason lies in the fact that so few people were willing to return from exile with Ezra. These traditions, however, do not function to denigrate the work of Haggai. In fact, several places suggest a special honor accompanied Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, for they are often listed as the men in the lion's den with Daniel (Megillah 3a; Sanhedrin 94a).

See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 4:355.

reign of Darius I between 520–518 BCE (Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20; Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1). By contrast, Ezra places the appearance of these four persons nearly two decades earlier in the immediate aftermath of the Edict of Cyrus, a decree that allowed for the return of exiles from Babylon to Judah. In addition, Ezra names two different persons (Sheshbazzar in 5:16 and Zerubbabel in 3:8-10) as respon-

Harmonizing Accounts of Temple Reconstruction



The perceived need to harmonize the accounts of Ezra 1–6 and Haggai has led to numerous theories in an unsuccessful attempt to resolve two major issues: (1) When was the foundation of the second temple laid (537, 520, or both)? And (2) Under whose direction did the work take place (Sheshbazzar in 537 [Ezra 5:16]; Zerubbabel in 537 [Ezra 3:8-10]; or Zerubbabel in 520 [Hag 2:15-18])? Attempts to resolve these tensions generally take one of three tracks: (1) the attribution of the tensions in Ezra to dependence on conflicting traditions, (2) the incorporation of a fictional account in Ezra 3 in a misguided attempt to coordinate Ezra and Haggai, or (3) the presupposition of two different times when the temple foundations were laid—the first one being unsuccessful. No suggestion has won the day, although on balance, scholars consider the events in Haggai more reliable. It appears safe to say that Haggai's castigation of the people for failing to rebuild the temple was not precipitous. Whether Haggai, Zechariah, Joshua, and Zerubbabel had only recently arrived or not, groups of exiles had been returning since 537. The fact that the temple had not been rebuilt from 537–520 makes Haggai's indignation in 1:4-11 understandable.

sible for laying the foundations of the temple in 537, while Haggai (2:15, 18) attributes this action to the leadership of Zerubbabel in 520. [Harmonizing Accounts of Temple Reconstruction] These traditions have been notoriously difficult to bring into line with one another.

The political situation in the time of Haggai has some bearing on one's understanding of the book as well. Zerubbabel, a name that means “seed of Babylon,” was a descendant of David and the grandson of Jehoiachin, the king of Judah who had been exiled to Babylon in the first deportation of 596 (2 Kgs 24:8-16; 25:27-30). Zerubbabel's name suggests that he was born in Babylon. His role as governor, designated by the Persian loan word *pehâ* (1:1), indicates that he was appointed by the Persians to rule the area. The practice of appointing indigenous magistrates formed a significant strategic element of Persian practice of governing in the early period of transition from the Babylonians, especially during the reigns of Cyrus (539–529) and Cambyses (529–522). This practice would be put to the test, however, in the early years of Darius (521–485) when

several localities revolted after he usurped control of the Persian empire. Darius spent the better part of the first two years putting down these rebellions. It has been suggested that Zerubbabel could have been replaced by Darius in the aftermath of these rebellions because Darius no longer felt comfortable with indigenous governors whose allegiance to the Persian monarch was unclear (see discussion of Hag 2:20-23). Nevertheless, the Persian policy toward Judah remained one of a beneficent ruler, which allowed considerable autonomy, especially in the religious realms. This policy helps,

in part, to explain why Persia remained the major super power in the region for over 200 years.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity of Haggai

The literary form of Haggai may be classified as a type of official chronicle—one that captures the gist of the prophet's major speeches surrounding the first months of rebuilding the temple. There is some evidence to suggest that this chronicle took shape by incorporating existing blocks of the prophet's speeches.¹ Nevertheless, this collection probably took shape relatively soon after the prophet appeared. Similar language, style, and themes in the editorial work between Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 give rise to the suggestion by several scholars that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 were published together at one point.²

The date formulas that appear in chronological order provide Haggai's skeletal structure. The speeches proper are generally addressed to the governor Zerubbabel (1:1, 12; 2:2, 20), the high priest Joshua (1:1, 12; 2:2), and/or the people (1:12; 2:2, 10). As the book progresses, one may detect that several changes are presupposed in order to show that work has begun on the temple. After the initial speech in which the prophet challenges the people and the leaders to turn their attention to the temple construction (1:1-10), the prophet recounts a message of divine presence (1:13), suggesting the project had been begun (1:12-15a). The next speech (1:15b-2:9) focuses on the comparison between the temple under construction and the former temple. This speech presupposes a certain level of discontent by those who can now tell that the new temple will not be as grand as the first temple. Haggai encourages the people to imagine the time when the grandeur of the new temple will supersede the former temple. Finally, the last two speeches (2:10-19, 20-23) indicate that the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone (2:14, 15, 18) and the ritual purification ceremony for the new temple could now take place. The reconstruction project would last five years, but the book only focuses on the initial stages of construction.

The book, while a composite of several dated speeches, exhibits an impression of unity. Three types of phenomena, however, have been suggested as possible signs that the text has been changed over time: relocations, textual variations, and glosses. First, scholars have

asked if some of the speeches represent composite or reworked accounts. Haggai 1:1-11 contains several tensions that suggest this text combines at least two speeches. For much of the twentieth century, a significant portion of scholars believed that Haggai 2:15-19 had been relocated from its original position after 1:15b. This theory has lost ground in recent years. Second, in at least three places (1:2; 2:16; 2:19), variations between the MT and LXX are significant enough to create the possibility that the text was changed. In each instance, however, the changes are most probably explained as attempts to clarify a difficult *Vorlage* (although it is not easy to ascertain whether these changes reflect an alternative Hebrew text or changes made by the LXX translators). Finally, at least one phrase (in 2:19) exhibits characteristics of a redactional gloss similar to those that appear elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve, which suggest an editorial hand has evoked language from Joel for the purpose of recalling Joel's promise of fertility.

Haggai is closely associated with Zechariah, both in tradition and in the transmission of the books. Ezra mentions the two prophets together, and rabbinic tradition almost always mentions them in tandem. The last half of the twentieth century saw considerable evidence marshaled that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 were also published together at an early stage in their history.

There are good reasons to suspect they entered the expanding corpus of the Book of the Twelve at the same time, though not necessarily before Zechariah 9–14 was added to fill out the Twelve.³

Books Set in the Postexilic Period



Zephaniah, the previous book in the Twelve, is set in “the days of Josiah” (Zeph 1:1) and anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem (as well as the promised return to Zion). Haggai’s chronological formulas, however, date the prophet’s message well into the Persian period. Also, the last two books, Zechariah and Malachi, have Persian period settings that post-date Haggai. Zechariah’s dating formulas (1:1, 7; 7:1) overlap Haggai’s but extend two years further. Malachi does not contain chronological superscriptions, but it is widely thought to have been compiled well after Haggai because it refers to the Persian governor (*pehâ* in Mal 1:8) but presumes a functioning temple. There is widespread agreement that both Joel and Obadiah were compiled after Jerusalem’s destruction, but the fact that they mention no specific dates or kings makes it necessary to distinguish the point of composition from their function in the Book of the Twelve (see introductions to Joel and Obadiah).

Haggai in the Book of the Twelve

Haggai plays a significant role in the structure of the Book of the Twelve and in the development of several motifs and/or themes that transcend the individual books. Haggai, with its dating formulas, is the first book in the Twelve that is unambiguously set in the postexilic period. [Books Set in the Postexilic Period] The Book of the Twelve, like Isaiah but unlike Jeremiah and Ezekiel, does not contain a description of the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem’s destruction.

Zephaniah anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem, and Haggai presumes the return of the exiles. [Skipping the Exile in Isaiah and the Twelve] This moment of change can be seen in the catchwords juxtaposing the promise of Zephaniah 3:18-20 with the opening speech of Haggai 1:2-6 (see [Reading Haggai 1:2-6 in the Book of the Twelve]). Haggai's position thus marks a pivotal turning point for the Book of the Twelve as the time when Israel's inhabitants "return" to the land and to YHWH.

Several themes and motifs in Haggai appear in more than one writing within the Book of the Twelve. The reconstruction of the temple appears for the first time in Haggai, and the organization of the temple is a significant focus of Zechariah 1–8. In both instances, the temple reconstruction is a much-anticipated positive sign. By contrast, Malachi complicates this motif with its condemnation of the priests and the people for the way they take temple worship for granted (see introduction to Malachi).

Another recurring theme in the Book of the Twelve that takes an interesting twist in Haggai is the question of the role of political and religious leaders. The religious and political leaders of the community (Joshua and Zerubbabel) respond positively to Haggai's initial message (1:4-11). Haggai calls Zerubbabel "governor of Judah" (1:1, 14; 2:2, 21). Afterward, Haggai offers unqualified praise of Zerubbabel (2:20-23), the grandson of Jehoiachin of Judah. Haggai's treatment of Joshua, the high priest, is less overt, but one gets the distinct impression that Joshua would also have been viewed positively for his role in helping get the temple reconstruction underway. The book of Haggai, in many respects, therefore represents the optimistic peak of the Book of the Twelve regarding leadership for the people. Zechariah 1–8 continues this optimistic note but ultimately presents an outlook for religious and political leadership that has greatly degenerated by the end of the chapter 8. By the time one gets to Malachi, the people have returned to a point very much like the portrayal of the people at the beginning of the Book of the Twelve, where the people and their leaders pay little heed to YHWH. Ultimately, the resolution

Skipping the Exile in Isaiah and the Twelve



Isa 36–39 contain an account of Isaiah's encounters with Hezekiah (726–696) that is a parallel account to 2 Kgs 18–20 and 2 Chr 30–32. These chapters deal with events surrounding the siege of Sennacherib in 701 BCE. Isa 39 concludes with a conversation between Hezekiah and Isaiah, but the reader then must adapt to an entirely new situation in Isa 40 that presupposes the exile is about to end in the time of Cyrus (559–521 BCE), who is even called by name (Isa 44:28; 45:1). In the Twelve, the reader must adapt from the end of Zephaniah (set in the reign of Josiah, 639–609) to the appearance of Haggai in the second year of Darius (520 BCE). See the illustration and further discussion in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary in [The Time Frame of the Latter Prophets].

of this motif may be seen in Malachi (3:16-18), where only “those who fear YHWH and who think on his name” will draw on the “book of remembrance” so as to be able to “distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between the one serving God and the one not serving him.” In other words, the true worshipers of YHWH will rely not on priests or government functionaries for guidance but on their own understanding of how God has acted from the testimony passed down to them.

Finally, the book of Haggai draws on specific language in the Book of the Twelve to make a significant theological statement about the fertility of the land. Haggai 2:17 cites and adapts Amos 4:9 in order to make the point that God’s longstanding punishment (resulting in the land’s infertility) has now been removed with the purification of the temple site. Likewise, Haggai 2:19 evokes the language of Joel so as to say that the desolation of the land will now begin to change. What has enabled this change in Haggai (and Zechariah 1–8) is (1) the decision of the leaders to reconstruct a holy temple and (2) the people’s change of heart in turning toward YHWH (see Zech 1:2-6). This motif of fertility continues in the Book of the Twelve in Zechariah (see discussion of 8:9-12) and Malachi (see discussion of 3:8-12), though again it does so in less optimistic terms because subsequent generations once again fail to remain faithful to YHWH.

The Message of Haggai

Four theological themes undergird the message of the book of Haggai: obligation to YHWH, holiness, obedience that leads to reward, and hope. The book opens with the prophet’s challenge to the leaders of Judah and the people (1:4-11). This challenge presupposes that the people have forgotten their obligation to YHWH because they have chosen to focus on their own needs and desires. The prophet expresses God’s displeasure at taking a back seat. While they build better housing for themselves, no one has managed to make any substantive progress on rebuilding the temple. Unsuccessful attempts had been made earlier to rebuild the temple under Sheshbazzar according to Ezra 5:14-16, but resistance from the leaders of surrounding areas had apparently thwarted these efforts. No one showed the necessary determination to complete the task. Haggai, in righteous indignation, jolts the people

and the leaders to change this situation, for God should not have to wait until it is convenient. A response to this call to obedience forms the foundation point from which the book proceeds.

The work on the temple is not viewed by Haggai as just another construction project. Haggai sees the reconstruction as a holy task for which the people and the place must be consecrated (Hag 2:10-14). This interest in holiness is an essential part of the entire sacrificial cultic system. Contrary to many modern Christian tendencies to highlight the personal, relational aspects of the God's character, Haggai's portrays YHWH as one who is completely "other," whose righteousness and purity cannot be overstated. The holiness of the God of Haggai figures prominently in the prophet's expectations for the temple.

Concomitantly, Haggai's God is a deity who must be appeased. The bleakness of the current situation, for Haggai, results from the people's failure to heed the call to obedience and holiness. The fertility of the land suffers, and the people are hurt economically because they have failed to reckon adequately with the ramifications of their actions that Haggai believes stem from God. God is withholding God's blessing because the people have not attended to God's house (1:4-11). Conversely, once proper actions have been taken, God will take note and will once again begin to bless this community (2:15, 19). This cause-and-effect theology is by no means foreign to the Old Testament. Blessings are often tied closely to curses if certain stipulations are not met (for example, see Deut 27-28). Human actions toward God have consequences, whether positive or negative. The problematic nature of this paradigm must

Haggai

Haggai's preaching is credited with the helping to rebuild the temple beginning in 520 BCE, nearly 70 years after the Babylonians destroyed the first temple in 587. Periodic enlargements of the temple made it much larger by the time of the first century. The second temple was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans and was never rebuilt. Only portions of one wall remain standing, and it has served as a sacred place of mourning ever since. This photograph, taken around 1875, shows crowds praying at the site.



La Maison Bonfils (19th–20th C.). Felix Bonfils: Jews praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (Palestine, today Israel). c. 1875. Photograph. Wailing Wall, Temple Mount, Jerusalem, Israel. (Credit: Adoc-photos/Art Resource, NY)

be born in mind, as books like Job and Ecclesiastes point out the limitations of this theology. Nevertheless, there is no getting around its presence in Haggai and other biblical texts. Haggai fully expects that the people's change of heart and change of behavior will result in God's removal of the drought and a return to agricultural prosperity. Twice Haggai tells the people that things will be different from this day forward (2:15, 19). The book of Haggai, however, does not report whether this change indeed occurred, but an improvement in the situation can be detected in Zechariah 8, which draws on the images of Haggai and suggests these changes were underway two years later (see Zech 7:1), although perhaps not to the extent Haggai anticipated (see discussion of Zech 8:9-12).

Finally, like most prophetic writings, Haggai presents a message of hope for the future. The hope in Haggai takes the form of promises of religious, economic, agricultural, and political changes that will benefit the people of Jerusalem and Judah. Haggai 2:6-7 promises that nations will come to Jerusalem to bring gifts of silver and gold for YHWH's temple. They will recognize that they are merely bringing what rightfully belongs to YHWH anyway. As a result, the temple will grow in splendor beyond the magnitude of the first temple. Haggai's message of hope also means the land will produce its bounty in the future as a blessing from God. The agricultural blessing (2:15-19) will begin with the consecration of the temple, and it will be realized incrementally. However, the change will mark a discernible shift from the subsistence-level production under which the people currently languish (1:9-11). The hope for political changes is simultaneously subdued and bold. YHWH is about to shake the nations (2:7) or the heavens and the earth (2:6, 20-23), meaning significant political changes for the better await Judah. While the prophet does not specifically state that Persia will be overthrown, the language of 2:23 comes close to an overt proclamation that Zerubbabel will be crowned king. Haggai anticipated that the building of the temple would usher in a new era of renewal for the kingdom. The fact that these hopes did not come to fruition for either Judah or Zerubbabel should serve as a warning against equating nationalistic hope with divine plans. In Haggai, hope for a better life (now that the temple reconstruction is underway) evidences a belief in God's goodness and in divine reciprocity. According to Haggai, in exchange for the people's obedience and sanctification, God will reward them with manifold blessings.

NOTES

1. See discussion of the tensions resulting from the combination of the Haggai Chronicler's formula and the appearance sketches in Hans Walter Wolff, *Haggai: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 17–20.

2. A significant cross section of scholars develops the idea of a common publication of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8. See especially Peter Ackroyd, "The Book of Haggai and Zechariah," *JJS* 3 (1952): 151–56; Rex Mason, *The Books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (CBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 8–10; W. A. M. Beuken, *Haggai – Sacharja 1–8. Studien zur überlieferungsgeschichte der frühnachexilischen Prophetie* (Studia Semitica Nederlandica 10; Assen: Van Gorcum: 1967) 27–83; Rex Mason, "The Purpose of the 'Editorial Framework' in the Book of Haggai," *VT* 27 (1977): 413–21. From a very different confessional and methodological perspective, see the work of Pierce who goes too far in speaking of a single corpus uniting Haggai, (all of) Zechariah, and Malachi: Ronald Pierce, "A Thematic Development of the Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi Corpus," *JETS* 27 (1984): 401–11; and "Literary Connectors and a Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi Corpus," *JETS* 27 (1984): 277–89. See also the discussion regarding the incorporation of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 into the Book of the Twelve by James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 255–57.

3. See the discussion of Zech 9–14 later in this commentary.

OUTLINE OF HAGGAI

- I. Haggai 1:1-15a: A Charge to Build and a Report of the Response
 - A. 1:1-11: Report of a Charge to Build YHWH's Temple
 - B. 1:12-15a: Report of a Positive Response
- II. Haggai 1:15b-2:9: An Exhortation and Promise for the Future
- III. Haggai 2:10-19: Holiness, Obedience, and Blessing
- IV. Haggai 2:20-23: Unfulfilled Political Prophecy of Hope

A CHARGE TO BUILD AND A REPORT OF THE RESPONSE

Haggai 1:1-15a

COMMENTARY

Haggai 1 readily divides into two sections: reports of the prophet's charge to the people and their leaders (1:1-11) and a report of the positive response of those groups (1:12-15a). The two sections are set off by date formulas in 1:1 and 1:15 that place these two scenes about three and a half weeks apart. These sections mention the prophet in the third person and report on the essence of the prophet's message in summary form. Multiple introductions (1:1, 3) and three messenger formulas (1:2, 5, 7) suggest a two-stage process of collection in which summaries of messages were collected by an anonymous editor, often named the Haggai Chronicler. The hand of this Chronicler is evident throughout (see 1:15b–2:1, 10, 18, 20), providing a chronological framework to the presentation of the prophet's message.

Report of a Charge to Build YHWH's Temple, 1:1-11

Haggai 1:1-11 contains four related segments: the first introduction from the Haggai Chronicler (1:1); the accusation against the people (1:2); the challenge to evaluate the situation (1:3-6); and God's commission to the people to build the temple (1:7-11). Together, these reports portray a situation of unrealized expectations. The scenes accuse the people of ignoring YHWH, then challenge them to build YHWH's temple in hopes that YHWH will remove the drought.

Haggai 1:1 opens the book with the first of six date formulas normally attributed to the Haggai/Zechariah Chronicler (Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1; 2:10, 18, 20). [\[Date Formulas\]](#) Taken together, these six dates in Haggai cover the time from September to December 520 BCE. The report that Haggai received the word of YHWH has a different for-

Date Formulas

Ω The date formulas in Haggai and Zechariah are unusually specific, suggesting a common milieu for the editing of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8. The only other prophetic book that provide this level of detail is Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1, 2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 34:12; 45:21, 25). The dates in Haggai and Zechariah correspond to the following dates in today’s calendar:

Reference	Dates	Converted Date
Hag 1:1	2nd year of Darius, 6th month, 1st day	August 29, 520
Hag 1:15	6th month, 24th day	September 24, 520
Hag 2:1	7th month, 21st day	October 17, 520
Hag 2:10	24th day, 9th month, 2nd year of Darius	December 18, 520
Hag 2:18	24th day, 9th month	December 18, 520
Hag 2:20	2nd time on the 24th day of the month	December 18, 520
Zech 1:1	8th month, 2nd year of Darius	October/November 520
Zech 1:7	24th day, 11th month, 2nd year of Darius	February 15, 519
Zech 7:1	4th year of Darius, 4th day, 9th month	December 7, 518

From an interpretive perspective, it is important to recognize that these dates overlap chronologically. They do not merely suggest a similar editorial style. The date in Zechariah 1:1 precedes the last three speeches in Haggai (2:10, 18, 20). This overlap in the chronology also accentuates the difference in content of 2:10-23, which presumes a change in attitude on the part of the people and the leaders.

mulation than other examples of this formula. Haggai 1:1 has the word coming *by the hand of* Haggai the prophet. This formulation emphasizes the instrumentality of the prophet more than the typical expression of the word event formula in most other prophetic writings (“The word of YHWH came *to* X”), including the remaining formulae in Haggai and Zechariah. [Word Event Formula] This subtle shift in language is one of several elements that sets apart Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi as a group. These deviations may also help account for the way in which Haggai is treated in rabbinic tradition. (See [Haggai in Jewish Tradition].)

Word Event Formula

📖 The formulaic introduction to prophetic material known as the “word event formula” normally appears in a more direct statement, “The word of YHWH came to X.” Of the eleven times this formula appears in the Latter Prophets with the expression “by the hand of,” six occur in Haggai, Zechariah, or Malachi (Isa 51:16; Jer 37:2, 17; Jer 50:1; Ezek 14:9; Hag 1:1, 3; 2:1; Zech 7:7, 12; Mal 1:1). This concentration adds to the sense of the common transmission of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8.

Haggai 1:1 mentions three men who figure prominently in the early postexilic period: Darius, Zerubbabel, and Joshua. Darius I was king of Persia from 521–485 BCE, and for the most part he seems to have been tolerant toward Judah—at least he is never criticized in biblical texts. The times mentioned in Haggai all occur during the second year of Darius (1:1, 15; 2:10; see also Zech 1:1, 7). During this period, Darius was still putting down numerous local rebellions across the empire. Darius took power after the death of the previous king, Cambyses (529–522), even though he was not the immediate blood relative of Cambyses.

Cambyses died unexpectedly while on a military campaign, and Darius assumed control of the army and the country. He returned to Persia where he arranged for the execution of the son of Cambyses, a man named Gaumata, by claiming that Gaumata was an impostor who had killed the real son of Cambyses. Darius had the support of the Persian army, but he spent the first years of his reign solidifying his power by putting down rebellions in vassal countries that hoped to use the vacuum created by the death of Cambyses to gain independence from Persia.

In this context, Zerubbabel was important for two reasons. First, Haggai calls Zerubbabel “governor” of Judah at this time, but second, Zerubbabel was part of the Davidic line. Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the king of Judah who was taken into captivity in Babylon in the first Jerusalem deportation of 596. It is not clear from sources whether Zerubbabel was appointed governor by Darius, by one of his predecessors, or even whether Zerubbabel ever played that role. [Zerubbabel in the

Biblical Record] Regardless, there is a certain sense of irony that Zerubbabel had the pedigree to lead Judah but functioned in a subservient role as governor to a king who initially did not have a direct claim to the Persian throne.

Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, was the chief priest in this early postexilic period. As such, Joshua would have had primary responsibility for the cultic functions. According to Ezra 2:2, Joshua and Zerubbabel had returned from Babylon in the aftermath of the

Behistun Inscription

A monument of striking power and propaganda, the relief shows prisoners being paraded before the king, while the massive inscription surrounding the scene details Darius’s account of his rise to power. Darius II (mentioned in the superscriptions of Haggai and Zechariah) had this stone inscription carved on the rocks of a pass on the mountain of Behistun in Western Iran. The inscription goes into considerable detail concerning his brutal suppression of those who rebelled against him in 521, and Darius II died in 486, so it provides some impressive evidence of Persian royal propaganda that is contemporary with Haggai and Zechariah. The text is written in three different languages (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian). The text and English translation are available online at <http://www.livius.org/be-bm/behistun/behistun03.html>.



Rock relief of Darius the Great in the act of chaining up the impostor kings and with inscriptions in three languages. Hovering above the scene is the official Persian divinity, Ahura Mazda, who is rendered in a winged sun-like disk.

Behistun, Iran. (Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

Zerubbabel in the Biblical Record



It is difficult to determine with any historical confidence how to understand the various presentations of Zerubbabel with respect to his Davidic heritage and his administrative function. Only 1 Chr 3:17-19 mentions his Davidic lineage, but since it is much later than Haggai, it could assume that an interpretive tradition of the royal connotations of the “signet” and “servant” has already been applied to Zerubbabel in Hag 2:20-23. By contrast, only Haggai ever refers to Zerubbabel as “governor.” The references in Haggai have generally been given historical credence, but there is no external validation in Persian or Judean records of the period. Literarily and canonically, however, reference to Zerubbabel in Haggai means that he plays an important political role. The omission of that title in Zechariah, however, should not obscure the fact that Zerubbabel also plays a role as a political symbol in Zech 4:6-10 in the interpretation of the vision of Zech 4:1-5 (see the commentary). Thus, whether or not Zerubbabel was actually appointed “governor” does not affect the literary reality created by Haggai and Zechariah.

For further reading, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Zerubbabel,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 5:957–58.

Edict of Cyrus (538). It is not clear when Joshua became chief priest, only that according to Haggai and Zechariah he served in that capacity. While he is mentioned briefly several times in Haggai, Joshua plays a more prominent role in Zechariah (see Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1-10; 6:11).

Haggai 1:1 ends awkwardly with the word “saying,” a word often used to introduce a direct quote. The awkwardness derives from the fact that Haggai 1:2 begins with a new introduction using the messenger formula. **[Messenger Formula]** Most English translations avoid this awkwardness by omitting the final word of 1:1. This awkwardness suggests a composite unit.

Haggai 1:2 contains a short saying that functions as an accusation against the

people of Judah in the early postexilic period. Following the messenger formula, which gives the saying authority from YHWH, the prophet charges “this people” with neglecting their God. To be

sure, nothing in 1:2 alone indicates anything more than the people’s opinion that it is not yet time to rebuild God’s house. The larger context, however, makes clear that Haggai refutes this position, giving a decidedly sarcastic tone to the term “this people.” The situation presumed in this verse confronts the reader

of the Book of the Twelve with the juxtaposition of the promise of Zephaniah 3:18-20 and the situation of Haggai 1:2-6. **[Reading Haggai 1:2-6 in the Book of the Twelve]**

A new introduction (1:3), in the form of a word event formula, begins the prophet’s challenge (1:3-6). The prophet challenges the people to take the situation to heart and consider what their actions say about their relationship to God. The challenge proper begins with a rhetorical question: “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?” (1:4). This question assumes that the people are living in finished houses, though there is some debate about the precise meaning of the term

Messenger Formula

ΑΩ The phrase “messenger formula” refers to the formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” that serves as an introduction to many prophetic oracles. See comments in Joel 1:1.

translated by the NRSV as “paneled.” The term either refers to “panels” on the roof or to panels on the inside walls of houses. The former would not necessarily imply any sense of extravagance, since it would merely mean a roofed house. By contrast, paneling on the inside walls would only be constructed for buildings of significance like the temple or a royal residence. Paneling is therefore the more appropriate translation, since in other Old Testament texts using the word it appears to mean the cedar planks used to line the walls *and* roofs of the temple (1 Kgs 6:9; 7:3, 7; Jer 22:14). The contrast is clear. At least some of the people are living in relative luxury, while reconstruction of YHWH’s temple has not yet gotten underway to any significant level.

Haggai 1:5-6 extends the contrast by grabbing the attention of the reader/hearer with two formulaic elements. First, the transitional phrase “But now” suggests that a significant shift is about to occur. Second, a new messenger formula adds weight to the authority of the message with its claim to speak for the LORD of hosts. Next, the prophet commands the people to examine their behavior, using an idiom that literally says, “Place your hearts upon your ways” (1:5). The meaning is clear and forceful: Think about what you are doing. Haggai 1:6 goes on to expli-

cate the situation. While (some of) the buildings in which people are living show signs that significant resources have been spent on them (1:4), there is a looming crisis from insufficient food, water,

Reading Haggai 1:2-6 in the Book of the Twelve



Catchwords appearing in Zeph 3:18-20 and Hag 1:2-6 invite the reader of the Book of the Twelve to consider the message of these two texts as one changes contexts from the preexilic to the postexilic setting of the Book of the Twelve. Zephaniah, a prophetic writing set in the time of Josiah (1:1), graphically anticipates Jerusalem’s destruction and punishment but ends with an eschatological promise (3:14-20). The last three verses of this material, however, promise YHWH will bring the people back from exile and restore their fortunes, at which time they will become famous for what YHWH has done on their behalf. Three times, Zeph 3:19-20 evokes the future promises using “at that/the time.”

Zephaniah 3:19-20: Behold what I am doing with all your oppressors in that **time** In that **time** I will bring you back and in the **time** of my gathering you then I will make you renowned and praised among all the *peoples* of the earth. When I return your fortunes before your eyes, says YHWH.

Haggai 1:2-4: Thus says YHWH Sebaoth, saying, “*This people* says the **time** has not come, the **time** to build YHWH’s house Is it **time** for you yourselves to live in paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?

This concentration of the word “time” is unusual: three times in two verses. This same triple concentration of “time” occurs in Hag 1:2, 4. In Haggai, however, the situation suggests a people who have not recognized God’s fulfillment of the promise of Zeph 3:18-20. Yet the situation promised in Zephaniah is quite similar to the situation presumed by Haggai. Zeph 3:20 promises that the people will be brought home, gathered together, and have their possessions restored. As a result, they will be renowned among the peoples of the earth. The people in Hag 1:2-4 have obviously returned, are gathered, and have had their possessions restored since they are now living in paneled (or roofed) houses. Their actions, however, betray the fact that they have failed to see God’s hand in bringing them back. Ironically, they cannot see their fame among the nations because they are unable to see what God has done in their own lives. Yet the fact that this story is still known today among Jews and Christians testifies to a further irony. “This people” became famous among the nations for their response to Haggai that led to the temple reconstruction.

clothing, and money. Using the contrasting images of a poet, the prophet calls their attention to the amount of energy they are expending just to get by: there is grain, but just enough; there is enough to drink, but just barely; there is clothing, but not enough to stay warm; and the wages are spent as fast as they are earned. This picture hardly portrays a glorious existence for the people who had recently returned from Babylon with hopes of a new promised land. Some of the people are living in finished houses, but the current scenario implies that economic hardships are prevalent for the majority of the population. The prophet has laid the foundation for his dispute with the people. This speech implicitly assigns a cause to the situation that will become explicit in 1:7-10: God will ignore the plight of the people because they are ignoring God. The message of these verses draws on the language of theodicy.

Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve



See the discussions of theodicy as a recurring motif in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary; in the portrayal of God the introduction to Joel; in the treatment of the two major themes in the message of Habakkuk; and in the recurring use of Exod 34:6-7 one finds in Joel 2:13-14; 3:19-20; Jonah 4:2; Mic 7:18-20; and Nah 1:2-3.

[Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve] Haggai takes a position akin to Proverbs in the wisdom tradition or the blessing/curse theology of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut 28:15-18). God rewards those who serve him properly and punishes those who do not obey. To be sure, this message has limits, as the book of Job points out so powerfully, but Haggai tries to motivate people to reevaluate

their priorities. As long as the people have no place for God, God will not improve the situation.

Haggai 1:7-11 commissions the people to rebuild the temple, and in so doing the prophet escalates the threat implied in 1:5-6. Following yet another messenger formula, Haggai 1:7 reprises the call from 1:5 to consider their lifestyle: “Place your heart upon your ways.” Now, however, rather than describing the situation, the prophet commands the people to change their behavior by changing their focus from their own houses to YHWH’s house by gathering wood for building YHWH’s temple (1:8). The prophet implores the people: “Don’t just stand there, do something.” Most people would be ill equipped to cut and haul the kind of lumber needed for the construction of the temple. Yet the prophet commands the people to go up to the mountain and bring wood. Scholars have postulated at length on exactly what the prophet expects the people to do. Does he really intend for them to go and gather wood from the hills (NRSV) or the mountains (NAS) or the (temple) mountain (MT)? Or would these have been words

intended figuratively for the leaders Joshua and Zerubbabel? At any rate, the purpose of the command is clear: to build the temple to bring pleasure and glory to God.

Haggai 1:9-11 deals with the source of unrealized expectations. The people are concerned about their own houses, while God's house lies in ruins (*ḥārēb*; cf. 1:4). The prophet explains the lack of rain ("the heavens have withheld their dew") as a consequence of the people's ignoring the sorry state of the temple (1:10). The prophet uses a play on words to correlate the problem with the punishment in 1:11: since God's house lies in ruins (*ḥārēb*), God will ruin the land by means of drought (*ḥōreb*). The implications of the impending drought are far-reaching for the fertility of the land. **[Fertility of the Land]** It will affect the whole area (the land and the mountains), the agricultural products (grain, new wine, oil), and consequently the living things of the land (humanity and cattle) and what they produce. For a community that is barely surviving, such a drought would create devastating consequences.

Fertility of the Land



This drought threatens the fertility of the land, a recurring motif in the Book of the Twelve and one that plays a significant role in Hag 2 (see discussion of 2:17, 19) and the sayings of Zech 8 (see especially the discussion of Zech 8:9-12).

Report of a Positive Response, 1:12-15a

One thing that makes Haggai a little unusual among the prophets is the fact that his message appears to have been taken seriously. As a result, work on the temple began at the behest of Zerubbabel and Joshua (Hag 1:12-15a). These verses report a series of three events that lead to the beginning of the temple construction slightly more than three weeks later. First, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of the people heard YHWH's words through Haggai and feared (1:12). Second, in recognition of their response, Haggai reports YHWH's affirmation: "I am with you." Third, YHWH is reported to have stirred the leaders and the people, with the result that they all "came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God" (1:14). This work began on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month (1:15a).

The verbs used to indicate these responses evoke similar images to the people's response "anticipated" in the literary introduction to Deuteronomy, where it is noted that after YHWH has scattered the people (4:27-29), they will turn again to YHWH in times of tribulation (vv. 30-31):

“In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him [literally, “listen to his voice”]. Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.”

Similarly, in Haggai 1:12, an obedient response (they listened to the voice of YHWH) leads to a reaffirmation of God’s covenant presence in 1:13 (“I am with you”).

Considerable discussion has been devoted over the years to the question of how to understand the date formula in 1:15a. Elsewhere in the book, these formulas generally introduce oracles. Such is not the case for the date formula in 1:15, for as it now stands it is immediately followed by another date formula in 2:1 that introduces a speech set nearly a month later (twenty-first day of the seventh month). In 1908, Rothstein popularized the view that 2:15-19 originally belonged after 1:15, but that it had somehow been relocated. Recently, however, this view has lost favor, and 1:15a is now read as the conclusion to 1:12-14, while 1:15b is seen as the start of the date formula that runs through 2:1 and introduces 2:2-9. Thus, the response recorded in 1:12-14 culminates in the people and the leaders beginning the temple reconstruction just weeks after Haggai spoke. Presumably, the intervening period was used to gather materials.

CONNECTIONS

The story that unfolds in this passage is a high point of Judah’s story in many ways. It presents a vignette where a prophet’s message takes hold because the people and the leaders recognized Haggai’s message as a word from YHWH. As a result, the temple was rebuilt. The prophet demands that people pay attention to God and they do. Sadly this vignette represents a rare thing among Old Testament texts. For instance, the Deuteronomistic History blames the leaders and the people for not heeding prophets, thus leading to the downfall of Judah and Israel that eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the first temple. (See [Deuteronomy, Deuteronomic, and Deuteronomistic] in the introduction to Hosea.) It is tempting to want to make facile applications for today. If only the

people in our churches would follow the lead of the people in Haggai's day and commit themselves to the building of the church in both physical and spiritual ways, life would be so much better. The larger biblical story reminds us, however, that life is more complicated than the picture one gets from Haggai 1 alone. In its canonical context, Haggai's success is short lived. By Zechariah 11, optimism about the temple has faded, and Malachi concludes the Book of the Twelve with a different picture than Haggai's, one in which the functioning temple is taken for granted and the priests are accepting second-rate offerings from the people. Even the book of Haggai itself ends with a prediction for Zerubbabel that never comes true. Such is the fleeting nature of success in worldly terms.

There is a theological message in this observation about the short-lived nature of success for communities of faith. While we may benefit from those who precede us, each generation must decide anew whether to be known as a people who obey God or as a people who merely go through the motions. The results of obedience are not always as positive as they were for Haggai or the people of Haggai's time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who resisted Hitler's rise to power, was certainly no less obedient to the call of God, but he paid for that obedience with his life. Not every call to obedience ends in success by worldly standards.

That being said, the effects of this small group should not be underestimated or overlooked. Heeding the call from the prophet led to the reconstruction of a temple that became a center for the worship of God for nearly six hundred years. This temple would receive major renovations and enlargements over time, but it functioned as Jerusalem's center of worship from its completion in 515 BCE until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. Little did "this people" know that the results of their actions would have such long-lasting effects.

How do we know whether our obedience to God will ever be noticed? We don't. We are not called to *succeed* or be noticed. We are challenged to *hear* God's call and to *obey*. Both parts are important. It is important to note the dynamic nature of the call in Haggai. Many of the people in that setting would have been among those who trusted God enough to return to Jerusalem from Babylon. It could easily be said that they were only going about their lives by trying to secure shelter. What if "this people" and

their leaders had not taken time to listen to a prophet telling them not to ignore God and God's house? How easy it was to become so wrapped up in the normal business of life that they were too distracted to hear God in their lives. We could certainly say the same.

It could have easily have turned out differently. This people was reluctant at first (1:2). It may not have been an easy sell. From Ezra (3:11-13), we see that Haggai's works were not universally seen as successful. Some of the people and their leaders were greatly disappointed at the quality of the new temple in comparison to that of the old. It is often hard to compete with idealized views of the past. How many times have we heard that things used to be so much better? Pastors would do well sometimes to go back to historical records of those "golden years"—church minutes, denominational records, and the like. They might be surprised to find that the people back then were saying many of the same things: "This generation has it easy. It was better back then." The truth is always more complex than our idealized views of the past allow us to recognize. This tendency to think the past was better needs to be confronted with the message of Haggai. Be faithful today. Listen for what God is doing in the present. Obey here and now. God will take care of the future just as God was present in the past.

AN EXHORTATION AND PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

Haggai 1:15b–2:9

COMMENTARY

These verses outline the message of a third appearance of the prophet Haggai. The unit begins with the final portion of 1:15 and continues to 2:9, since 2:10 begins yet another dated speech. The verses contain three sections: the date formula (1:15b–2:1), an exhortation to the people who are discouraged (2:2–5), and a promise of a new order (2:6–9).

The date of these verses according to 1:15b–2:1 is now the twenty-first day of the seventh month. This date sets these words about one month after the previous message, which had indicated that work on the temple had finally begun. To put this information in context, one need only imagine the kind of work that would have been going on during this first month. The hard, grueling work, mostly clearing away rubble and hauling in building supplies to the site, would easily discourage all but the most committed in these initial stages. Combating discouragement appears to be a primary motivation for Haggai in this message to the leaders and the people.

Haggai 2:2–5 presents words of encouraging persuasion designed to prod the people to continue. Haggai 2:2 builds on the word event formula in 2:1 in much the same way as the double introduction of Haggai 1:1–2. In Haggai 2:2, God commands the prophet to speak to three addressees: Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant of the people (see discussion of Hag 1:12).

The content of the message begins with the three rhetorical questions in 2:3: “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” These questions are designed to make a point. The first question addresses the oldest members of the community, a group that could not have been very large but that undoubtedly com-

manded considerable respect because of their age. The temple had been destroyed in 587 BCE, sixty-seven years before Haggai spoke. Given that the average life expectancy was far less than fifty and that less than ten percent of the population lived to be more than seventy, few would have been alive who could recall the first temple, and fewer still who could have recalled it with any accurate detail. Nevertheless, Haggai addressed the concerns of this small but influential group in order to make a point: despite the meager appearances, God would use the work to accomplish great things. It is not clear from this text alone, however, whether Haggai spoke about the progress or the scope of the construction. Still, by comparing this text to Ezra 3:11-13, it seems more likely that it is the limited scope of the project rather than the progress that lies behind the concerns. Haggai's questions acknowledge the validity of their perspective. Anyone who could recall the size of the former temple could see that the current project would not match the grandeur of the former building.

Haggai 2:4 enjoins the addressees mentioned in 2:2 three times to take courage, be strong. This thrice-repeated command is probably not accidental. It is the same command issued to Joshua son of

Nun after Moses' death as Israel prepared to cross the Jordan (Josh 1:6, 7, 9). Unlike Joshua 1, however, Haggai's encouragement is delivered to two leaders (political and religious) and to the people themselves. This subtle allusion to the end of the exodus period is made even more explicit in the following verse, at least in the MT tradition. Following the three admonitions to take courage, there is a single command given: "work."

Interestingly, according to Haggai 2:4b-5, these commands to take courage are not primarily grounded in a promise that YHWH would restore the temple to its former glory. Rather, these commands are grounded in experience, present and past.

Take courage because God is with you (now), just as

he promised when he brought you out of the land of Egypt. This affirmation of God's presence in their current endeavors reiterates the promise made in 1:13, but in its present form 2:5a draws on the exodus tradition when it says, "according to the word which I cut with you when you came out of Egypt." [The Present Form of Haggai 2:5a] This promise of divine presence is further clarified in 2:5b, in

The Present Form of Haggai 2:5a

AΩ It seems likely that the MT of Hag 2:5a represents a scribal gloss. The LXX, which normally contains a literal translation, does not contain the phrase "the word which I cut with you in your going out from Egypt." Given the language of 2:4, which echoes the words of encouragement given to Joshua just before crossing into the promised land, it is easy to see how a later scribe would have added 2:5a, which also alludes to the exodus experience. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the return from exile sometimes draws parallels to the exodus (e.g., Isa 43:14-19). The parallels to Joshua would likely have been noted by careful observers.

two rather interesting ways. First, the statement that God's spirit is in their midst is powerful and unusual. Those Old Testament texts where God speaks of putting his spirit on an entire group of people are limited in number (Isa 44:3; 59:21; Ezek 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 4:1-2 [MT 3:1-2]). Of these, all but two occur as promises of some future action. Only Isaiah 59:21 and Haggai 2:5 make this statement in a way that indicates it is operative for the listeners of the moment. This is a strong endorsement from YHWH for the group that has started work on the temple. Second, the admonition not to fear at the end of 2:5 evokes oblique yet comforting nuances to the exodus and conquest stories. Since other allusions to the exodus events play a role in this passage, it should be noted that in the Pentateuch and Joshua, the verb "to fear" (*yārā'*) is most commonly used to describe the reaction of the nations to the mighty deeds of YHWH. In Haggai, however, the verb is used to comfort YHWH's people by telling them not to fear, just before announcing the upheaval of the nations in 2:6-7. The command "Do not fear" is the typical beginning of a salvation oracle. [Salvation Oracle] In this case, it forms the transition from a word of encouragement to a pronouncement of future weal for Judah that will result from a change of the world order.

Haggai 2:6-9 presents a message about the imminent change of the world order, the nature of which, however, should be carefully noted. It begins with a new messenger formula and looks beyond the current situation into the future plans of YHWH. God's plans are depicted as something imminent and significant, using language of the shaking of the heavens, earth, sea, and dry land. This grouping of words refers to the created order. The imminence of this expected change can be seen at the beginning of 2:6 ("in a little while"). The verb "shake" (*rā'as*) often serves two inter-related functions in prophetic literature: the shaking from an earthquake (see Amos 9:1) and the shaking of the earth as part of a theophany report (see Nah 1:5; Amos 1:2; Mic 1:2-7). The use of "shake" in Haggai 2:6, however, is slightly different. In most of these theophanies, the earth shakes in response to YHWH's appearance, but here God does the shaking directly. Moreover, in its literary context, the verse begins a promise that serves as the reason for the prophet's encouragement in the preceding verses.

Salvation Oracle

AO The salvation oracle is generally recognizable by its structure and its opening marker. Its structure involves three parts: a promise of divine intervention, a statement of the results, and an indication of God's purpose. The oracle often begins with the phrase "fear not" to introduce the promise. Salvation oracles, it is generally assumed, developed as a form in the context of priestly responses in a cultic setting where priests had been approached to offer a blessing or a curse.

While 2:6 related to the natural created order, in 2:7 YHWH promises an upheaval to the political order using the same verb, “shake,” but this time the object of the verb is the nations. Several important observations should be made to hear this verse properly. First, the nations are shaken for a purpose: that they might bring treasures into Jerusalem and the house of YHWH. Second, commentators have noted that the language of shaking imparts a punitive undertone that distinguishes this image from other post-exilic prophetic texts that speak of a pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem (e.g., Isa 60:5–11).¹ Third, with this in mind, it has been suggested that this text reflects the expectation that the nations who plundered the temple treasures will return them, but this

Tribute

This is a scene from the black obelisk in which Jehu, king of Israel, brings tribute to Shalmaneser III, King of Assyria, around 830 BCE. The artifact is currently housed at the British Museum in London.



Basalt bas-relief on the black stele of Shalmaneser III. Assyrian, 9th C. BCE. British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

explanation does not go far enough.

Consequently, Haggai 2:8 raises a far-reaching possibility: YHWH announces that Jerusalem will become the political center of a renewed kingdom. The shaking of the nations does not specify only the nations who plundered the first temple. Rather, the prophet makes an important theological claim. The nations will bring the treasure to Jerusalem because God commands it. God is, after all, the rightful owner of the silver and gold in the first place. This language bears a certain similarity to covenant treaties, when one

king conquers another and demands tribute from his new vassal. The nations are not bringing tribute to a foreign conqueror but to the rightful owner; as God is the source of all creation, the silver and gold already belong to God.

According to 2:9, the purpose of the treasure brought by the nations will be twofold: to enhance the glory of the temple and to provide peace (*šalôm*). The first part of this rationale addresses the concerns expressed by the elderly who remember the glory of the

former temple. The prophet promises that the prestige of the new temple will exceed that of the first temple. For those who could not see beyond the immediacy of the construction site, Haggai 2:9 promises that the work is not in vain: the people are building something of importance. The second reason, to give peace, is not immediately clear from the context. The Hebrew word for peace, however, does not just mean the absence of war or conflict. It also connotes positive attributes: wholeness, prosperity, and health. Noting this wider nuance, the NRSV translates here with prosperity, so as to tie this promise to the situation where the lack of agricultural normalcy created a subsistence-level lifestyle (see Hag 1:6, 9). The NRSV makes this promise a response to the economic problems the people faced. In this sense, the two promises of 2:9 serve to address the economic shortfall and the concerns of the group that is not optimistic about the scope of the project.

CONNECTIONS

Most projects of any significance face some level of opposition. In 2:1-9, the building campaign in Haggai is no exception. Yet it is important to hear the voices of that opposition. Haggai confronts head on the concerns of one group—those who considered the new temple a step backward. Haggai also confronts concerns of another group, albeit less directly—the group whose meager subsistence made them wonder whether they would survive the winter. How effectively would Haggai’s encouragement work on a building project in our time? The answer is not as straightforward as one might expect at first glance. Some lessons can be learned, but there is also a danger to be avoided in attempting to draw parallels too closely.

To be sure, Haggai’s message has significance for churches who find themselves in the midst of a protracted building campaign. It is important, as one begins a project, to keep the bigger picture before the congregation. Remind people early and often that what they are undertaking is to enhance the work and ministry of the church on God’s behalf. Haggai’s message also helps provide insight into the fact that change will generate resistance. Leadership will be required to deal honestly and faithfully with issues raised in the planning and building phases. Issues raised when discussing large

projects can be spurious or important. Not everyone who asks questions about the parameters of a building project does so because he or she wants things to remain as they are. Not every concern can be addressed to everyone's complete satisfaction, however. For this reason, a real sense of mission and consensus needs to be developed before a project is undertaken. If a congregation is firmly committed to a project, periodic reminders and words of encouragement will help keep that commitment intact.

The message of Haggai needs to be contextualized in order to avoid a real danger for the modern church. The historical situation of Haggai's time is important to bear in mind as one considers potential building projects. First, there was a *genuine* need to which Haggai could point. In Haggai's time, the temple had lain in ruins

Different Visions in Ezra 3:10-13



Haggai does not present the full picture of those who resisted the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra 3:10-13 indicates the consternation on the part of older members of the community who realize that the new temple will not be as grand as their recollection of the first temple:

¹⁰When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

for nearly seventy years after it had been destroyed and for nearly twenty years after people had begun returning to Judah and Jerusalem from exile. Second, Haggai presented a strong case that the people needed to build this temple to honor God. Haggai's personal honor was not the issue, nor was the prestige of the community. Third, and perhaps most often forgotten in American contexts, the building project was designed to meet the needs with available resources. [Different Visions in Ezra 3:10-13] While rebuilding this temple required sacrifice on behalf of the people, the scope of the project was not as grand as some people had wanted. The leaders were not trying to replace the full extent of the old temple complex. The new temple was a replacement for the time, not someone's desire for the latest, greatest sanctuary. There are many reasons for a building project, but not all of them are equally noble. Is there a genuine need for expanding or renovating space, and do the plans for a new

building meet the need in a responsible and defensible manner? Or does a project merely assuage the desires to have the newest, brightest facilities in the area? These are issues that congregations and leaders need to assess prayerfully and carefully before committing resources.

NOTE

1. Jörg Jeremias, *Theophanie. Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1965) 666–69; David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 67.

HOLINESS, OBEDIENCE, AND BLESSING

Haggai 2:10-19

COMMENTARY

Haggai 2:10 begins the penultimate unit of the book with a new date formula, setting 2:10-19 only about two months after the preceding unit (2:1-9). This unit continues through 2:19, after which the final date formula signals a new speech in 2:20. The unit divides into three sections: the date formula (2:10), a rhetorical parable about clean and unclean stipulations (2:11-14), and an admonition to mark the date (2:15-19). The speech as a whole deals simultaneously (1) with the ongoing need to encourage the people to continue their important work and (2) with marking the date on which the foundation was set in place (cf. 2:18; Zech 4:9; Ezra 3:10-11).

Haggai 2:11-14. The messenger formula marks the beginning of a new speech that functions as reported dialogue. The prophet is commanded to ask the priests for a ruling—literally a *tôrâ*. The word *tôrâ* means law or instruction. It was the function of the priests, and later the rabbis, to settle questions of interpretation. Haggai's rhetorical question is not difficult to answer. Verse 12 contains both the question and the priests' response. The question relates to the issue of holiness. If a consecrated item, in this case meat, touches what is unclean, will the item convey its holiness to what is unclean? The answer from the priests is recounted very quickly without elaboration: no. The brevity of this response adds to the impression that this was an easy question. The entire system of consecration is built upon the premise that something holy must not touch something that is unclean (see Lev 5:2-3).

Haggai 2:13 asks the converse to the question of 2:12: Does touching something unclean contaminate what is clean? Just as quickly, the priests respond in the affirmative. What is profane will pollute what is clean. The real point of the dual questions, however,

becomes apparent in 2:14, in which the prophet compares the answers to the work done by “this people” and “this nation.” It was impossible, according to the prophet, for the people to please YHWH because they could not offer proper sacrifices without a purified temple. It was thus imperative that the temple be consecrated in order for their work to be effective.

Haggai 2:15-19. These verses mark the date of the prophet’s speech as a turning point. “But now” in Haggai serves a transitional function (see 1:5; 2:4). “From this day onward” marks this day as a pivotal moment from which a change should be visible. With the laying of “stone upon stone,” the prophet expects the situation to change for the people’s benefit. The reference to placing stone upon stone likely refers to more than merely the beginning of the construction phase. Recent studies demonstrate that Haggai presupposes an official rededication ceremony designed to purify

the temple site and the altar where sacrifice was already taking place. An altar had existed at the temple ruins, and some initial construction of the temple foundations may have taken place in the time of Sheshbazzar (see Ezra 5:16), but apparently none of the prior work had been completed to the extent that a ritual cleansing of the temple area could have taken place.

Haggai 2:16 in MT is difficult to translate, though the sense is quite clear. The LXX translation of 2:16, which the NRSV follows, reads a slightly smoother text, but it is likely a deliberate attempt to smooth over the difficulties. [LXX

Translation of Haggai 2:16] Still, the prophet makes

the point that they should compare the time to come with what life was like previously. Subsistence levels of grain and wine were the order of the day (cf. 1:6, 8, 10). Haggai 2:16 depicts a situation where serious shortages of grain and water existed.

Haggai 2:17 continues to describe the situation, but three points suggest that this verse may have a broader *literary* horizon than merely the book of Haggai. First, as was the case in the first chapter, the current situation is attributed to God’s punishment of the people. According to 2:17, God has instigated the plagues that have caused the situation. Second, 2:16-17 portrays two distinct pictures of the “past” situation. Haggai 2:16 coincides well with the language of Haggai 1:6, in which the situation presupposes a lack

LXX Translation of Haggai 2:16

ΑΩ At the beginning of 2:16, MT reads, “from their being” or “since they were.” This phrase has no clear syntactical connections to the context. The LXX reads, “what you were,” and combines it with the end of 2:15. The NRSV follows the lead of the LXX and translates, “how did you fare,” with the call to consider in 2:15. Marvin A. Sweeney argues that the phrase in the MT essentially means, “In the past one came upon . . .” and should be read with 2:16. In any case, the end of 2:15 is closely connected to the beginning of 2:16.

Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; vol. 2; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) 552.

of food, water, clothing, and money. But this situation occurs after the crops have been harvested (both in the imagery and in the timing of the date formula). By contrast, 2:17 refers to crops that are still in the field. Haggai 2:17 goes beyond the immediate situation as described in Haggai 1:4-11 and presents confusing pictures of a situation where there is simultaneously not enough moisture (dry wind or blight) and too much (hail, mildew). This leads most commentators to argue that 2:17 is a secondary gloss, but they do not give much thought to why this gloss might be here. Third, Haggai 2:17 draws on the language of Amos 4:9. [Haggai 2:17 and Amos 4:9] This language, especially when combined with other allusions in Haggai 2:19, suggests that this gloss may well stem from the hand of a redactor working on the Book of the Twelve. This text fits into a series of texts that develop a motif of the fertility of the land in the Book of the Twelve (see Hag 2:19; Zech 8:9-12), a motif anticipated by Joel (see [Fertility of the Land in the Book of the Twelve] associated with Joel 2:25).

Haggai 2:18 provides the final two examples of a recurring refrain: “place upon your heart” (Hag 1:5, 7; 2:15; 2:18 [twice]). The first reemphasizes the significance of the day as mentioned in 2:10, even as it specifies the event that takes place on that day as the day of the founding of the temple of YHWH. The second instance of this refrain in 2:18 functions as the introduction to 2:19.

Haggai 2:19 concludes the unit with a series of rhetorical questions that leads to a promise of blessing. Two problems with this verse, one conceptual and the other grammatical, deserve mention before one can fully appreciate the full force of the rhetorical questions. First, the “storehouse,” as the word (*mēgûrâ*) is often translated, was not an above-ground structure. It was a hole dug in the ground for storing grain.¹ Wolff thus understands the word as “corn-pit,” whereas translations like “granary” (Petersen, Smith) or—worse—“barn” (NRSV, Verhoeff) are misleading to English readers.² Second, the grammar of the rhetorical questions is strained to the point that BHS suggests one phrase has been added as a gloss. Related, the images used in this awkward phrase hardly

Haggai 2:17 and Amos 4:9



The dependence on Amos 4:9 in Hag 2:17 is clear, though Hag 2:17 does not exhibit the same interest in the vineyards, fig trees, and olive trees that link Amos 4:9 more closely with Joel. These elements of fertility are included, however, in Hag 2:19, albeit in a passage that appears secondary.

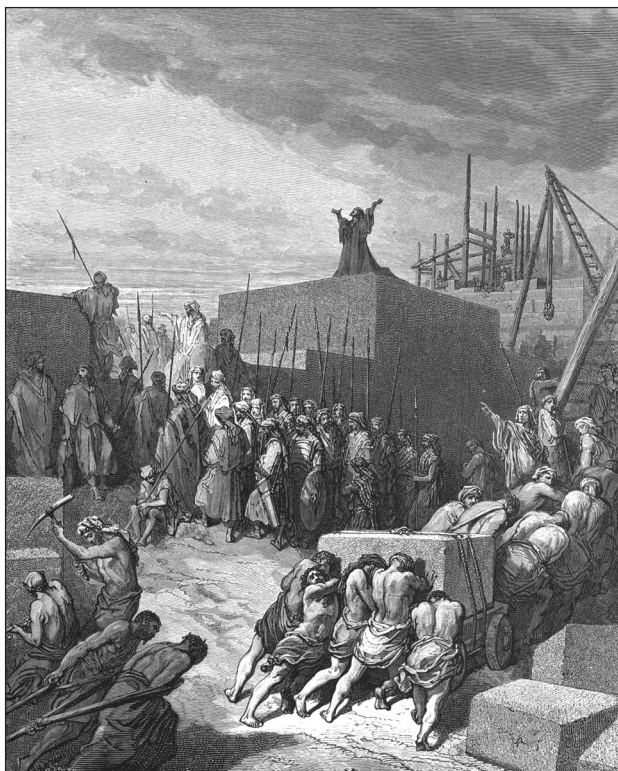
Hag 2:17: I smote you *and* every work of your hands with blight and with mildew; and with hail (I smote) all the work of your hands, but you did not (*return*) to me. Utterance of YHWH.

Amos 4:9: I smote you with blight and mildew; and the gnawing locust devoured your great gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees. Yet you have not returned unto me. Utterance of YHWH.

fit the immediate context. Literally, the verse is translated as follows:

Is the seed still in the grain-pit?
Or the vine, or the fig tree, or the pomegranate?
Or has the olive tree not borne fruit?
From this day I will bless.

Temple Rebuilding



Paul Gustave Doré (1832–1883). *The Rebuilding of the Temple*. Engraving.

The awkwardness of the second line can be noted from two observations. First, the syntax of the second line connects with line 1, not with line 3 as suggested by several translations (e.g., NRSV). Second, the combination of the second line with the first creates conceptual problems, since none of the items mentioned in line 2 (vine, fig tree, and pomegranate) would be stored underground. The problem created by this line can be resolved, however, if one recognizes the line as a redactional gloss intended to evoke the fertility images from Joel. [Fertility Images from Joel] Now that the people have responded positively to God's messenger, Haggai informs them that things will change. By drawing

on a series of fertility images in the Book of the Twelve, line 2 of 2:19 alerts the reader to a significant moment that they should not miss. Haggai 2:19 ends with a divine blessing like the one anticipated in Joel 2:14—a text that functions paradigmatically for the Book of the Twelve. Joel's promise of fertility only now begins to unfold. For the reader of the Twelve, it has been a long time coming, but the generation of Haggai and Zechariah takes significant steps toward obedience.

The rhetorical questions in 2:19 assume an affirmative response. This assumption means that the questions call on the people to

remember that prior to this day subsistence reigned, but that YHWH will now make the land fertile again so that it will produce in greater measure. The time of the year (December) comes at a point well after the harvest and well before the time of planting. As such, the promise will not be fulfilled immediately, but the prophet notes that the change that will occur derives from the work that has now begun.

CONNECTIONS

At its core, this section emphasizes holiness, obedience, and blessing. The ritual purification of the temple area was demanded by the holiness of God. The people, although they needed reminding, followed the lead of the prophet, the governor, and the priest in undertaking the consecration of the temple area. As a result, the prophet anticipates YHWH's blessing in the form of agricultural fertility in which the people will benefit from their obedience. This movement *from* call to obedience *to* reward represents the typical theological movement that most people expect from God. And yet this text contains subtle reminders that the actualization of this movement is not that common, and certainly not a mechanical formula by which we may manipulate God into bettering our fortunes. [Blessing vs.

Prosperity Gospel]

Both in the context of Haggai and the Book of the Twelve, one must remember that the change in the people came about slowly, required considerable effort to keep going, and probably did not last long. Haggai begins by confronting the people for ignoring YHWH while they attempted to satisfy their own needs. Moreover, in the context of the Book of the Twelve, Haggai's success in getting the people to change comes only after the failure of Hosea through Zephaniah to change the people. Only in Haggai and in the opening chapters of Zechariah do the people as a whole respond affirmatively to God's message through the prophets. It is

Fertility Images from Joel



The gloss in Hag 2:19 constitutes one of a series of allusions to Joel created by an editor working on the Book of the Twelve. Several of these redactional glosses call the reader's attention to foreign powers, equating them with Joel's "locusts" (see discussion of Joel 1:4; 2:25; Amos 4:9; Nah 3:15; Mal 3:11). Several more texts and redactional glosses move in a different direction by developing the motif of the promised fertility of the land that will be a blessing to come after a period of punishment (see Joel 2:14,19; Amos 4:9; 9:14-15; Hab 3:17; Zech 8:12). The gloss in Hag 2:19 functions as a significant marker in that it signifies, for the reader of the Book of the Twelve, the point at which the promised fertility becomes actualized for the present generation. With their decision to rebuild the temple and their repentance (see Zech 1:6), the people at the time of Haggai and Zechariah represent one of the few times in the Book of the Twelve that God's people are encouraged for doing what God would have them do. In this respect, the turning point from a future promise of fertility to the actualization of that promise fits well with the development of the Book of the Twelve.

Blessing vs. Prosperity Gospel

The tension between expectations related to prayer and blessings from God is often manipulated by preachers of questionable motives. A biblical view of blessing cannot and should not be corrupted into an economic program. Some writers are simply wrong in the way they cherry pick verses and twist their meanings to suggest that faithful praying will obligate God to reward those who pray. One example of a book that goes too far in this respect is Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity: The Choice Is Yours* (Chicago: KPC Publications, 1985). For a critique of this movement as part of a larger movement that seeks to use religious beliefs to create global networks, see Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

rare for a group of people to commit themselves in significant ways to accomplishing things on behalf of God.

The promise in Haggai is not some mechanistic process by which we can control God's response. We cannot manipulate God's actions so that by doing something good for God we force God to reciprocate. The promise is not fulfilled in dramatic terms from one moment to the next. In order to see the fulfillment of this promise, the prophet tells the people to mark the day. This command implies that the coming change will be gradual. Only by remembering what life was like before will one be able to see how much better things become over time. Much of life is lived in anticipation of another blessing from God. We easily fall prey to the desire to have God do more for us. Much less frequently do we look back on

our own significant points of commitment and reflect on how we have changed for the better. We are more likely to ask God, "What have you done for me lately?" than to acknowledge what God has already done.

NOTES

1. Paul F. Bloomhardt, "The Poems of Haggai," *HUCA* 5 (1928):174.

2. Hans Walter Wolff, *Haggai* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 58; David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 58; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* (Word Biblical Commentary 32; Waco: Word Books, 1984) 159; Pieter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 102–103.

UNFULFILLED POLITICAL PROPHECY OF HOPE

Haggai 2:20-23

COMMENTARY

Haggai 2:20-23 contains a promise with political and theological connotations. The date formula that begins 2:20 sets this brief message as a second message delivered by the prophet on the same day as 2:10-19. While 2:10-19 offers a message of encouragement to the people, 2:20-23 contains a message for Zerubbabel, the Persian appointed governor of Judah (2:21).

Following the date formula and the introductory note (2:20-21a), the message proper begins (2:21b) with a divine speech that restates God's intention to upend the world's political situation: "I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms." It repeats 2:6b α verbatim, but the accent changes and becomes political in tone with 2:22-23. Haggai 2:22 anticipates the violent overthrow of the kingdoms of the nations. The syntax and imagery depict divine intervention. God creates confusion among the armies who will ride forward only to die by the sword of a comrade (lit., "And the horses and their riders will fall, each one by the sword of his brother").

The passage does not specify which nations will be destroyed, but the cosmic nature of 2:21b (the heaven and the earth) implies nothing short of a complete reconfiguration of the world order. As such, this verse poses a potential challenge to Persian authority. This challenge is accentuated by the assumption that Zerubbabel will be at the head of this new order ("on that day") as YHWH's representative and as the one who will exercise YHWH's royal authority (2:23). Zerubbabel is called "my servant" who is "like a signet ring" whom YHWH has "chosen." It is difficult to miss the royal imagery behind the language of 2:23. The "servant" of YHWH is a term that can be used for a king, such as David (1 Kgs 8:66; Isa 37:35) or even

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Jer 25:9). The intentional evoking of royalty is further solidified by the reference to Zerubbabel being made “like a signet ring” for two reasons. First, a signet ring functioned as the seal of an official. Second, the only other Old Testament text that applies this term to a person is Jeremiah 22:24,

Jeremiah 22:24



The text reads: “As I live, says the LORD, even if King Coniah son of Jehoiakim of Judah were the signet ring on my right hand, even from there I would tear you off.” In Haggai, it can hardly be accidental that the promise of 2:23 functionally reverses the removal of authority from Jehoiachin, the last (recognized) king of Judah, to the reinstitution of royal authority for his grandson.

where it applies to Zerubbabel’s grandfather Jehoiachin (Coniah), albeit in the sense of removing the signet ring from YHWH’s hand. [Jeremiah 22:24] Finally, YHWH’s use of the term “choose” also carries overtones of a Davidic connection (see Ps 78:70). In short, Haggai’s promise comes close to stating that Zerubbabel would soon function as king (which completely reverses the message of Jer 22:24). The promise

articulated in these verses carries significant political implications.

Theologically, these verses often surprise people not only because of their political overtones but also because the anticipated events simply do not occur. They represent one of several instances where specific predictions recorded in the Old Testament, pronounced by a prophet in good standing, actually do not come true (see [Rejecting the Prophet(s) in the Book of the Twelve] in Hosea 9 as well as [Prophetic Prediction] in the Connections to Hag 2:20–23). Consequently, these verses run contrary to the perception most people have that in order to be a true prophet one could not predict something that did not eventually come true. Nevertheless, such predictions do exist and need to be incorporated into our understanding of biblical prophecy. We know these predictions did not come true since Zerubbabel disappears rather quickly from the scene and since the Persian empire lasted almost two hundred years after this prediction was uttered. Scholars have even speculated that the prediction in Haggai 2:23—made as it was in the early period of Darius’s reign when he was facing a series of rebellions by local rulers—may have even contributed to Zerubbabel’s replacement as governor.¹ Haggai 2:20–23 offers a message of imminent hope that Israel would soon return to prominence, but this promise goes unrealized. Unlike other prophetic books, which tend to end with eschatological words of hope for weal in the distant future, Haggai concludes with a promise to a particular ruler, a reminder that religious hopes and political personages often make uneasy partners.

CONNECTIONS

The failure of Zerubbabel's rise to political prominence and of the complete overthrow of the nations should caution interpreters at several points. First, when speaking for God about governments, one needs to be cautious in making connections between human leaders and God. The case can be made that Haggai's pleasure at finding a government functionary willing to do the right thing made him too zealous in his hopes for what Zerubbabel would accomplish. Baptists, more than most religious groups, learned that lesson well early in their history, as they were frequently punished by governments controlled by religious functionaries with their own ecclesiastical agendas. The Swiss Brethren, a branch of the Anabaptists in the early Reformation period, learned the hard way that religion and politics often lead to tyranny when Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss reform movement, turned on those whom he had encouraged when they pushed for believer's baptism. In this country, early Baptists, among others, fought hard for safeguards to establish boundaries between religion and governments. When religious leaders, even well-meaning ones, get hold of the reins of power, oppression usually results.

Second, speaking for God brings a tremendous responsibility and may have unanticipated consequences. If a prophet like Haggai could believe that he was speaking for God, yet incorrectly predict the fate of the governor in the name of God, then it ought to serve as a warning to all of us to watch what we say in God's name.

What does it say that those who transmitted the words of Haggai continued to include this oracle long after Zerubbabel had passed from the scene? Several possibilities can be mentioned. First, God has a way of fulfilling prophecies in unexpected ways. [Prophetic Prediction] Second, the respect for Haggai as a true prophet of God probably made those responsible for transmitting Haggai's speeches

Prophetic Prediction



The function of prophetic prediction is often misunderstood by those who attribute to prophets some kind of magical code wherein a prophet's pronouncements are twisted to interpret their fulfillment in our day. J. J. M. Roberts wrote an insightful essay in 1979 in which he surveyed four types of prophetic predictions in the Old Testament: (1) those whose fulfillment has already come to pass (e.g., Amos 3:9; Hos 3:4; Jer 29:10); (2) those that did not and never will come to pass (e.g., Ezek 26:7-14; Jonah 3:9); (3) those not yet fulfilled but that we still hope will be (e.g., Isa 11:6-9); and (4) the controversial category of those whose "fulfillment" takes place in surprising ways (e.g., the "fulfillment" of Ezek 37–45 in Rev 20:4–22:5). This last category involves significant changes in the plain-sense meaning of a prediction, and so it can be difficult to distinguish this category from the second or third groups. For example, Roberts lists Hag 2:20-23 as an example of the fourth group, but most would say Haggai's expectation for Zerubbabel and the end of Persian rule was at least partially unfulfilled since Zerubbabel did not become king in any real sense.

See J. J. M. Roberts, "A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction," *Int* 33 (1979): 240–53.

reluctant to remove this section. If other things Haggai had said came true, perhaps God still intended to use Zerubbabel in some fashion. Similar expectations flourished concerning Elijah (Mal 3:5) and David's descendants (Sir 47:22; 2 Esd 12:32) long after they had died. These expectations undoubtedly played a role in keeping hopes alive for a messianic figure that appear to have been widely circulated in the first century CE.

Third, over time prophetic books tended to end with words of hope that anticipated an eschatological change for the better. Clearly, Haggai fits this pattern. Hosea concludes with a promise of restoration contingent on a positive response from the people. Joel 3:1–21 (MT 4:1–21) anticipates punishment of the nations who have taken advantage of Judah. Amos 9:11–15 contains expectations for restoration of the land's fertility, the Davidic kingdom, and Jerusalem. Habakkuk 3:16–19 awaits restoration of Jerusalem and the land. Zephaniah 3:14–20 promises restoration for Jerusalem and its population. Zechariah 14 anticipates a grand future for Jerusalem. In times of distress, in ancient and modern communities, humans crave hope, a response of faith that God has not abandoned them.

Finally, it is possible that Zerubbabel's Davidic lineage helped keep the expectation of a role for Zerubbabel alive. The New Testament Gospels show how strong the expectation of a Davidic messiah still was in the first century. Zerubbabel appears as one of Jesus' ancestors in the genealogies of both Matthew (1:12–13) and Luke (3:27), though not with the same lineage. At any rate, this passage provides evidence that the tradents responsible for collecting, editing, and preserving the words of the prophets took their tasks seriously. Haggai's word of hope for the future surely served as encouragement that God had not forgotten this people.

Of course, these expectations also create confusion for later readers and communities of faith. "Messianic" texts of the Old Testament conveyed the hope for the return of a Davidic king, and by the first century CE, these expectations led many of Jesus' contemporaries (e.g., the Zealots) to think of a political and military ruler like David. Jesus thus spent considerable time explaining that the kingdom of which he spoke was not a political kingdom. Still, Jesus' reference to the kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven) is not entirely without parallel. [Kingdom of God] The sectarian documents at Qumran include numerous references to the kingdom of

God, depicting celestial throne scenes where the heavenly host worships God as a means of demonstrating how God should be worshiped (e.g., 4Q400 1 I, 1–2). Sources from Hellenistic Judaism refer to the kingdom of God and emphasize its eternal nature that can be perceived with the help of wisdom (e.g., Wis 10:10). Jesus puts a strong emphasis on the nearness of God’s kingdom. These concepts do not interpret the kingdom of God in political terms but actually subvert ideas that any nation can encompass the idea of God’s kingdom.

Kingdom of God



For further reading, see Bruce Chilton, “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 3: 512–23.

NOTE

1. See discussion in Theodore A. Busink, *Der Tempel von Jerusalem: Von Salomo bis Herodes. Eine archäologisch-historische Studie unter Berücksichtigung des westsemitischen Tempelbaus* (Studia Francisci Scholten memoriae dicata 3; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 2:799–800.

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ZECHARIAH

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

Dating the Prophet and the Book

The prophet Zechariah worked in the latter half of the sixth century. Biblical sources concerning Zechariah are limited to the books of Zechariah and Ezra, but they both associate Haggai and Zechariah with the decision to rebuild the temple in 520 BCE. [Zechariah in Jewish Tradition] Ezra 5–6 twice mentions the prophets Haggai and Zechariah together (5:1; 6:14) in a manner that suggests that the prophetic writings were known and that these two prophets were given credit for instigating the rebuilding of the temple. These two references, however, frame a narrative episode (5:3–17) that also credits Cyrus for granting permission for the rebuilding of the temple in 538 BCE. They imply an earlier date for the reconstruction of the temple foundation than one would assume merely by the date formulas of Zechariah. [Dating the Temple Reconstruction]

Zechariah 1–8 presents the prophet as one who challenges the people of his generation to turn to YHWH (1:2–6), as a visionary who seeks to interpret temple reconstruction and polity (1:7–6:15), and as a figure of authority to be consulted on religious and political matters (7–8). Apart from these literary portrayals, the only biographical information concerns the name of his father and grandfather (1:1, 7), though these names create debate (see discussion of the genealogies in 1:1). In all likelihood, this lineage helps to situate Zechariah as a member of a prominent, postexilic, priestly family. These priestly connections could have aided Zechariah's status and would also account for why Zechariah speaks in 7:4 in response

Zechariah in Jewish Tradition



The sixth-century prophet Zechariah does not play prominently in rabbinic discussions, as the rabbis generally deemed postexilic prophecy to be inferior to prophecy after Jeremiah. When he does appear, it is generally in conjunction with Haggai and Malachi. Three traditions of note are associated with this prophet. First, Zechariah (as with Haggai and Malachi) was sometimes identified as one of the men in the fire with Daniel. Second, he is portrayed as a compatriot of Ezra, undoubtedly drawing on the associations of Zechariah and the book of Ezra. Finally, Zechariah is noted as one of three postexilic prophets (again with Haggai and Malachi) who made particular contributions. Zechariah was credited with providing the exact location of the temple altar after having seen the archangel Michael offering sacrifice at that exact spot. See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (trans. Henrietta Szold, 7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication of America, 1968) 4:354–55; 6:385–86, 413, 440, 446.

Dating the Temple Reconstruction



The dates for when the second temple reconstruction actually began are not consistently presented. Haggai and Zechariah imply that the temple reconstruction began in 520 BCE, but they make no reference to earlier attempts to rebuild the temple. By contrast, Ezra 1 speaks of Cyrus funding temple reconstruction, including vessels from Babylon (see Ezra 1:7). Ezra 2 contains a list of people who purportedly returned to the land, but this list raises numerous historical questions. Ezra 3 then recounts how Joshua and Zerubbabel set out to begin to build the altar “in the seventh month” (3:1-2). Taken at face value, this attempt to reconstruct the temple appears to be set close to the time of Cyrus’s decree (539 BCE), but Haggai and Zechariah mention these same persons some eighteen years later during the reign of Darius (520 BCE). Most scholars resolve this tension with some explanation of Ezra as the conflation of multiple sources in which an earlier attempt at reconstruction managed only to reconstruct the external altar.

For more detailed treatment of the problems, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 39–47; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco: Word, 1985) xxiii–xxiv; and H. G. M. Williamson, “The Composition of Ezra 1–6,” *JTS* 34 (1983): 1–30.

to a question reportedly delivered to the priests according to 7:3. Apart from these inferences, little other biographical information about the prophet is presented.

Dating the book of Zechariah involves coming to terms with two different kinds of compositional material. The material in Zechariah 1–8 largely stems from close to the time of the sixth-century prophet, while Zechariah 9–14 comes later, perhaps in the late Persian or, more likely, the early Hellenistic period (at least in its final form).

Two elements receive significant treatment for dating Zechariah 1–8: the homogeneity of perspective and the signs of editorial shaping with Haggai. Scholars assume that a version of Zechariah stems from close to the time of the prophet’s appearances. Some argue for an early combination with Haggai, suggesting that the Haggai/Zechariah 1–8 corpus was “published” in time for the dedication of the second temple in 516/515 BCE.¹ These arguments are particularly compelling in that inserted material emphasizes the role of Joshua and Zerubbabel in ways that would be difficult to understand if the material was not inserted during the life-

time of Joshua and Zerubbabel (see [Dating the Vision Cycle] in Zech 2:6-12). Others see a more protracted period of compilation prior to the combined corpus, though most assume the end of sixth century as the time when the combined corpus came together, at least initially.²

In either case, evidence suggests the compilation of Zechariah 1–8 imitated the style of Haggai, though not slavishly, since one finds only three date formulas in Zechariah (1:1, 7; 7:1), and they are more loosely connected to the units they introduce than the six in Haggai (1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 18, 20).³ Scholars give more credence to the dates in Haggai and Zechariah than a date in the reign of Cyrus implied by the location of Ezra 3. Thus, both ancient tradition and critical scholarship treat Zechariah 1–8 as a secure

representative of at least one prophetic perspective of the late sixth century BCE.

As discussed in the introduction to Haggai, a majority of scholars accept the arguments that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 were edited together early in their transmission history. Questions regarding when and how Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 became associated with the corpus that would become the Book of the Twelve, however, continue to be debated.

Zechariah 9–14 represents an organized collection of materials from late in the Persian period or early in the Hellenistic period. Evidence for dating this material, though complicated, will be discussed here while its organizational structure and possible development will be discussed under “Literary Form, Structure, and Unity” below.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, chapters 9–14 have been treated as having a different author and date than chapters 1–8. The differences in outlook are too stark in terms of the general message, the forms, the style, and the intellectual presumptions to be the work of one person. Whereas Zechariah 1–8 contains mostly material that leans toward prose (sermon summaries, vision reports, and short sayings), the material in 9–14 has more extended poetic sections. To be sure, 9–14 has some prose sections as well, but the largest section of prose (chapter 11) does not exhibit much similarity to the prose of 1–8. Most significant, the optimistic outlook concerning the future of Jerusalem in Zechariah 1–8 largely disappears in portions of 9–14 (e.g., Zech 11:1-17; 12:10-13:9; 14:1-2). Zechariah 1–8 assumes that a radical change for the better has begun for Jerusalem while the nations will soon be punished (Zech 1:12-21 [MT 1:12-2:4; 7:1-8:23]). Zechariah 1–8 expects this change to be nearly immediate. By contrast, in 9–14, the restoration of Jerusalem will happen eventually, but these chapters anticipate (1) a much longer period of turmoil before the change and (2) a major attack from the nations prior to Jerusalem’s deliverance (Zech 9:14-15; 12:1-14; 14:1-21). Further, whereas Zechariah 1–8 conveys a positive outlook toward the priestly and Davidic leadership, Zechariah 9–14 castigates these groups and the prophets (Zech 13:1-6, 7-9; see also 11:1-17). For these and other reasons, scholars do not believe Zechariah 9–14 came from the same author as Zechariah 1–8.

Diadochoi

ΑΩ The term *Diadochoi* means “successors” in Greek. It refers to the generals and scions of Alexander the Great, the king whose untimely death in 323 set off a series of wars and infighting for decades around the Mediterranean and into Persia. For information and further reading on the machinations, the power plays, and the intrigue, see Bob Bennet and Mike Roberts, *The Wars of Alexander’s Successors 323–281, Vol. 1: Commanders and Campaigns* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen and Sword Military, 2008).

Dating Zechariah 9–14, however, has proven notoriously difficult. Finding agreement on the exact date, or even a relatively narrow time frame, has not proven possible, but three options receive more consideration than others: the end of the sixth century, the mid-fifth century, or around the time of Alexander’s control of the region (332–323 BCE).

The first date one finds widely supported is the period of Alexander or the subsequent wars of the *Diadochoi* (especially 323–311 BCE),

though this date has generally found more widespread acceptance among European scholars than among American scholars. [*Diadochoi*] Because of the mention of Greece as the object of the attack in Zechariah 9:13, critical scholarship took this date seriously through much of the twentieth century.⁴ Elliger, in particular, argued that the military campaign described in Zechariah 9:1–12 bears a striking resemblance to the campaign of Alexander.⁵ Nevertheless, the correlation of Zechariah 9 with this military campaign has been challenged on several fronts. Still, Albertz remains convinced of the essential similarities.⁶

The end of the sixth century, as another possible date for Zechariah 9–14, has captured the imagination of several scholars in the aftermath of the works of Plöger and Hanson, who believed the early years of the return from exile were rife with conflict between two religious parties and that this conflict could account for the antagonistic attitudes that appear in Zechariah 9–14.⁷ However, the existence of such narrowly defined factions has rightly been called into question on several fronts, not because conflict did not exist but because limiting it to two groups is too reductionist. Further, the time needed between the optimistic outlook for the temple’s role in Zechariah 1–8 and the anticipation of the tumultuous events in 9–14 cannot be adequately reconciled with a date only two decades removed from the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple. Moreover, the degree of intertextual involvement between Zechariah 9–14 and other portions of the canon (notably Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Pentateuchal traditions) is not easily reconciled with a date so early in the postexilic period.⁸

Recently, scholars have suggested the period between 450–400 BCE. Meyers and Meyers, for instance, argue for this time frame.⁹

The evidence on which they base this date, however, is notably thin for proving that a setting in the mid-fifth century is quantifiably better than the late fourth century. Their arguments highlight the animosity and hostilities between the Persians (with whom Yehud presumably sided) and the Greeks and/or the Egyptians. These revolts played a major role in the imperial policies of Persia over the better part of the fifth and fourth centuries. Battles large and small happened during the reigns of Persian emperors.¹⁰ [Persian Rulers] The reign of Xerxes I was particularly threatened in the middle of the century. Meyers and Meyers follow Kenneth G. Hoglund in placing a great deal of weight on a series of fortresses built in Judah during the fifth century.¹¹ These fortresses, in their view, accentuate the threat Persia perceived Greece and Egypt to be. So they develop an explanation for Greece in Zechariah 9:13. More recently, however, Grabbe and others have challenged the pivotal role of Yehud as a strategic military region for defending Persian interests in the area.¹²

At best, then, Meyers and Meyers offer a plausible scenario whereby Zechariah 9–14 *could* have been composed in the mid-fifth century, but this does not account adequately for at least three issues. First, the explicit mention of Greece in 9:13 contrasts with the lack of any explicit reference to Persia in Zechariah 9–14. Second, the social setting presumed in Zechariah 9–14 does not match up particularly well with those in Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah—works that are also frequently (though not universally) dated to the mid- to late fifth century. Third, the literary and intellectual developments of Zechariah 9–14 represent considerable development on several fronts: (1) the proto-apocalyptic outlook in Zechariah 9–14, while not as developed as Daniel, is more prominent in Zechariah 12–14 than in almost any other part of the Old Testament; (2) the extensive use of other canonical writings reflects a development of intertextual techniques and sources that are easier to explain in the late fourth century; and (3) the rejection of “Ephraim” in Zechariah 11 makes more sense in the aftermath of Alexander, when tensions with Samaria again intensified, than it does in the mid-fifth century. [Alexander and Josephus] Thus, while not

Persian Rulers



Persian control of Judah (Yehud) was maintained during the reigns of Persian kings, many of whom had lengthy reigns:

Cyrus (559–530), defeated Babylon in 539

Cambyses II (530–522)

Darius I (522–486)

Xerxes I (486–465)

Artaxerxes I (465–424), followed briefly by

Xerxes II (424) and Sogdianus (424–423)

Darius II (423–404)

Artaxerxes II (404–359)

Artaxerxes III (359–338)

Artaxerxes IV (338–336)

Darius III (336–330), whom Alexander defeated in 332 BCE

Alexander and Josephus



Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, recounts a series of events in *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.316–47 surrounding the arrival of Alexander the Great into the region. While many of the episodes convey legendary and mystical elements, some of the events described could explain certain themes in Zech 9–14. For example, Josephus recounts Alexander's movement from Syria to Sidon (consider the defensive actions of YHWH moving down the Mediterranean coast in Zech 9:1-9), and the threat to the land by "the Greeks" (9:13). Also intriguing is the relationship between the Samaritans and the high priest in Jerusalem according to the Alexander traditions in Josephus. These tensions lead to the split of those in Jerusalem and those in the Ephraimite territories, which would help explain the breaking of the union in Zech 11:4-17. The Jerusalem priest at first refuses aid to Alexander, which opens the door for Sanballat to approach Alexander and ask to be appointed high priest over a new temple at Gerizim, near Schechem. Sanballat urges Alexander to split the loyalties of the Jewish people:

(321) But Sanballat thought he had now gotten a proper opportunity to make his attempt, so he renounced Darius, and taking with him seven thousand of his own subjects,

he came to Alexander; and finding him beginning the siege of Tyre, he said to him, that he delivered up to him these men who came out of places under his dominion, and did gladly accept of him for their lord instead of Darius. (322) So when Alexander had received him kindly, Sanballat thereupon took courage, and spake to him about his present affair. He told him, that he had a son-in-law, Manasseh, who was brother to the high priest Jaddua; and that there were many others of his own nation now with him, that were desirous to have a temple in the places subject to him; (323) that it would be for the king's advantage to have the strength of the Jews divided into two parts, lest when the nation is of one mind and united, upon any attempt for innovation, it prove troublesome to kings, as it had formerly proved to the kings of Assyria. (324) Whereupon Alexander gave Sanballat leave so to do; who used the utmost diligence, and built the temple, and made Manasseh the priest, and deemed it a great reward that his daughter's children should have that dignity.

This episode tells of Alexander giving permission to Sanballat to build a temple on Gerizim as a deliberate means of splitting from Jerusalem.

Quotation from Flavius Josephus, *Ant.*, 11:321–24, in William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 306.

without problems, the early Hellenistic period still seems the most likely time frame for understanding Zechariah 9–14.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity

Structurally, Zechariah divides into five discreet sections. [Literary

Literary Blocks of Zechariah



The book of Zechariah consists of three blocks in Zech 1–8 and two divisions in Zechariah 9–14:

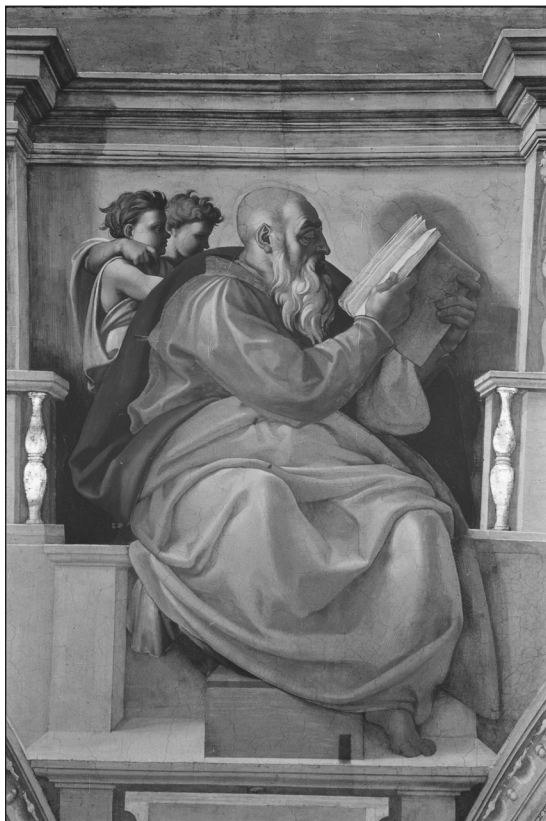
- Zech 1:1-6: Prophetic confrontation dated to eighth month of second year of Darius
- Zech 1:7–6:15: Series of eight visions
- Zech 7:1–8:23: Collection of short sayings, framed by question/answer about feasts
- Zech 9–11: First "Burden of the Word of YHWH" section; Ephraim plays a prominent role
- Zech 12–14: Second "Burden of the Word of YHWH" section; Jerusalem and Judah the focus

Blocks of Zechariah] Of these five units, only the first (1:1-6) is not a composite unit containing either multiple episodes or disparate compositions. Zechariah 1:1-6 summarizes a speech to the people that reports the failure of the previous generations to heed the message of the prophets whom YHWH has sent while successfully challenging the current generation to turn to YHWH. The eight visions of the second block (1:7–6:15) share common compositional elements, but they also show evidence of later reworking. The third block, Zechariah 7–8,

constitutes a collection of short sayings dated approximately two years after temple construction began (compare 7:1 with 1:1, 7). These sayings are thus grouped thematically and framed by a report of a dialogue between the prophet and the priests on the one hand and a delegation from Bethel on the other. Zechariah 9–11 begins the fourth block with a new superscription, but the theme concentrates on the eschatological fate of the nations and the territory of the former northern kingdom. It does, however, also include positive expectations for Jerusalem and Judah. Finally, Zechariah 12–14 also begins with its own superscription, but it deals exclusively with the fate of Jerusalem, Judah, and the nations following the eschatological battle, without ever addressing the former Ephraimite territories.

The unity of 1–8 and 9–14 should be treated separately. The three discreet units in Zechariah 1–8 all begin with a date formula. These date formulas appear in chronological order and mention three dates: the eighth month of the second year of Darius (November 520 BCE) in 1:1, the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month (February 15, 519) of that same regnal year in 1:7, and the fourth day of the ninth month (December 7, 518) in 7:1. Each date formula plays a role in the logic of Zechariah 1–8 by marking stages of action. The first date formula, Zechariah 1:1, overlaps with Haggai, and it provides pivotal data for the logic of the combined corpus. As well, the unit that follows the date formula (1:2–6) documents a positive response from the people to the prophet's call to repentance. Thus, this positive response means that, when combined with the picture from Haggai, the date in Zechariah 1:1 suggests that a commitment from the people (Zech 1:2–6) functioned as part of a progressive change in the people's attitude. In Haggai, those concerned only with building their own houses (1:1–11) learn to fear YHWH, which leads to the beginning of the construction (1:12). Next, the people's repentance, a kind of spiritual cleansing (Zech 1:2–6), occurs prior to the laying of the cornerstone (Hag 2:10–19; see 2:15). Then, Zechariah 1:7 picks up two months after Haggai's oracles cease, and the first vision report (Zech 1:8–17) is from the heavenly realm of peace and tranquility in the land. This vision then leads to a series of vision reports that lay out a program for the way society should function in Jerusalem. Finally, Zechariah 7:1 picks up nearly two years later with a series of sayings designed to convey a sense of hope during the building

Michelangelo's Zechariah



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564). The Sistine Chapel; ceiling frescos after restoration. *The Prophet Zechariah*. Perhaps a portrait of Pope Julius II. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

process—hope for recognition from the Samaritan leadership (see discussion of the literary frame of 7:1-3 and 8:18-23) and encouragement for those beginning to doubt whether the promises would ever be realized (see discussion of Zech 8:9-12).

Despite this chronological flow, most scholars see significant points of tension between the vision reports (1:7–6:15) and the collection of sayings (7:1–8:23) that suggest these materials have been shaped for their current context. In one sense then, these collections are not “unified” by the hand of a single author composing them in one setting. In another sense, however, these passages have been “unified” by persons who arranged and edited the material to provide the impression of a cohesive presentation.

The blending of later perspectives with earlier source material raises tantalizing questions that cannot be answered definitively, for the gaps of

knowledge are too numerous to give any degree of confidence. For example, why does Zerubbabel play a smaller role in Zechariah than in Haggai? Did Haggai’s final oracle cause the Persian ruler to fear that a rebellion by Zerubbabel was imminent, causing Zerubbabel to be relieved of his duties? Or does the smaller role reflect a stronger priestly orientation for Zechariah because of his family background?

This blending of perspectives does, however, convey a message. For example, the narrative report that begins in 7:1-3 is separated from the response in 8:18-23 by short sayings that essentially summarize the message of Zechariah 1–8, while the response to the delegation answers their question by incorporating images from the first vision report. Thus, despite the tensions suggesting that the material in Zechariah 1–8 utilizes texts composed at different times, one can hardly escape the impression that they have been

brought together for a reason. This impression, however, changes rather dramatically in Zechariah 9–14.

The unity of chapters 9–14 is more complicated than Zechariah 1–8. Clearly, the section has been organized and attached to the end of Zechariah 1–8. Beyond this initial consensus, however, the complexity of the developmental process of these chapters and the point at which they were attached to Zechariah 1–8 continue to be debated. Since two major thematic foci can be detected (Ephraim and Judah), and these changes are marked by similar superscriptions (9:1; 12:1), a discussion of the character of the respective portions of 9–11 and 12–14 will follow and will, in turn, give way to a brief discussion of when this material entered the larger corpus.

In addition to distinguishing the authorship and date of Zechariah 9–14 from those of Zechariah 1–8, one should note how the thematic focus in 9–11 changes in 12–14. Scholars often treat the concluding sections of Zechariah as anonymous appendages added to the Zechariah corpus alone or, as argued more recently, to their current position as part of the development of the Book of the Twelve. Some argue that 9–11 and 12–14 were compiled at different times, and so call the sections Deutero- and Trito-Zechariah, respectively. Nevertheless, most have seen the combination of 9–14 as part of the same process. Recent redactional investigations have tended to see the development of this material as part of a relatively complex process whereby source material was added in one or more stages. These investigations have drawn attention to the ways in which the content of 9–11 and 12–14 share at least three characteristics: a discernible rhetorical arrangement, dependence on intertextual allusions, and a strong proto-apocalyptic orientation. First, chapters 9–11 move *from* depicting YHWH's defense of the land against the nations *to* exploring the fate of Ephraim (i.e., the former northern kingdom), while chapters 12–14 focus instead on the ultimate fate of Judah and Jerusalem followed by the nations. Second, the material in chapters 9–14 draws extensively on other texts (especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel but also Isaiah, Hosea, and Malachi). Third, while Zechariah 1–8 exhibits eschatological perspectives, most recognize that the latter chapters (especially 9–10, 12, and 14) assume a proto-apocalyptic tendency because of their focus on a battle associated with the day of YHWH.

Nevertheless, despite these common characteristics, the rhetorical flow of Zechariah 9–14 can be traced more readily in the smaller

units than when one tries to read 9–14 as a whole. The disjuncture between thematic groupings suggests that a series of relatively independent units has been compiled thematically and arranged to create Zechariah 9–14 as we now have it. Recent analyses have suggested that the shepherd materials in these chapters (10:2–3b; 11:1–17; 13:7–9) play a significant role in linking some of the major thematic groupings, even though the shepherd materials themselves do not stem from a single hand.¹³ Moreover, it is evident that at some point the superscriptions of Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; and Malachi 1:1 were added to delineate the thematic blocks inherent in these sections. As of yet, however, no clear consensus has arisen regarding the exact order in which these blocks came into the developing Book of the Twelve.

For reasons of space and audience, this commentary has assumed that a significant portion of Malachi as we now have it was added to Zechariah 1–8 (see the introduction to Malachi). Zechariah 9–14 likely developed in more than one stage subsequent to the combination of Zechariah 1–8 with Malachi, whose function as the conclusion of the corpus continued to hold sway (see discussion of Mal 3:13–21).¹⁴ Other scholars have suggested plausible models wherein Malachi was integrated after portions of Zechariah 9–14.¹⁵ This issue continues to receive scrutiny.

As already noted, the question of the unity of Zechariah 9–14 is a complicated one, yet it is not one that necessarily determines the point of entry of these chapters into the larger corpus. The debates center on two questions: (1) How does one account for the complexity of perspectives inherent in the material within the major sources used in constructing Zechariah 9–14? (2) Was the material added to the end of Zechariah 1–8 only, or does Zechariah 9–14 interrupt an existing connection from Zechariah 8 to Malachi?

Regarding the first question, one finds two different models explicitly or implicitly lying behind the treatments of Zechariah 9–14: a model of compilation or a developmental model. The first model sees 9–14 as the compilation of sources by one or two editors who joined 9–13 or 9–14 together. This compilation presents a more pessimistic eschatological response to the events one finds in 1–8.¹⁶ The weakness of this model is its inability to account adequately for a single compilation that contains so many competing perspectives. The second model argues for a series of redactional expansions.¹⁷ The weakness of this model is the

inability to convince scholars that significant differences in 9–14 must be assigned to another redactional layer. In the end, the physical changes to the scroll would result in a complex series of seemingly random additions.

The second question (was Zechariah 9–14 added to Zechariah 8 before or after Malachi was appended to Haggai/Zechariah 1–8?) has been a subject of scholarly debate only in recent years, and so far no consensus has emerged.¹⁸ This commentary works with a model that treats Zechariah 9–14 as one of the latest blocks added to the Book of the Twelve, one that interrupts a connection involving Zechariah 8 and Malachi. In part, this decision is based on prior redactional studies, but in part, it also results from the question of the function of the chapters themselves.¹⁹ Zechariah 9–14 takes a long view of the future. Its presentations dwell on the day of YHWH and the ultimate fate of the people in an idealized world yet to come. Zechariah 7–8 and Malachi, by contrast, largely focus on the religious life of the community much closer to home.

Zechariah in the Book of the Twelve

The material in Haggai and Zechariah provides the Book of the Twelve with a significant pivot point. As well, the change from Zephaniah, a book with a preexilic setting, to Haggai (set in the early Persian period) is no accident in the order of the Book of the Twelve. The dated material in Zechariah 1–8 overlaps with Haggai, giving the impression that the two prophets succeeded in getting the leadership and the people of Judah and Jerusalem to change by repenting and rebuilding the temple.

The position of Zechariah between Haggai and Malachi also shows, however, that the optimism did not last. The idea that all of Jerusalem's problems would be resolved with the completion of the temple was not the end of the story. Rather, when Malachi begins, the temple is again functioning, but the problems with which the Book of the Twelve began—false worship and ethical improprieties—have become a part of life in the reconstructed temple. In between the focus on the pivotal moment of reconstructing the temple and the re-emergence of cultic abuse (i.e., Zech 1–8 and Malachi), Zechariah 9–14 presents issues concerning the day of YHWH with which the Book of the Twelve concludes (Mal 4:1–5 [MT 3:19–23]).

Debate concerning the addition of 9–14 can mask a number of recurring issues that come back into play in these chapters and that play a role across multiple writings in the Twelve. These issues include the role of Ephraim in a reunified kingdom, the fertility of the land, the day of YHWH, the repentance of the leadership, and the fate of Jerusalem. Each of these recurring issues is addressed as part of a new eschatological paradigm. The fact that Zechariah 13:7–9 quotes from Hosea 2 and Malachi 3 in the same verse (the first and last writings of the Book of the Twelve) suggests a growing awareness of a developing canon and should be seen in conjunction with the similar canon-conscious citations in Zechariah 14 (drawing from Isaiah) and at the end of Malachi (which refer to Moses and Elijah while alluding to Joshua). The latter citations connect the end of the *Nebi'im* (Prophets) with the beginning of the *Nebi'im* and with the Torah. These citations help one understand Zechariah 9–14 as a compilation designed for its location near the end of the Book of the Twelve (see the discussion of Mal 4:4–5 [MT 3:22–23]).

Quotations and allusions in Zechariah 9–14 as well as Zechariah 1–8 are too numerous to document fully here.²⁰ The advanced means by which a wider array of texts are cited represents another reason for dating Zechariah 9–14 later than 1–8, though 1–8 has its share of citations. The book of Zechariah draws meaningfully on Amos, Joel, Hosea, and Malachi within the Book of the Twelve. It also draws from the other prophetic books. Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in fact, play a larger role in Zechariah than in most of the rest of the Book of the Twelve. As well, the end of Zechariah and the end of Isaiah bear strong thematic resemblance by focusing on the purity of Jerusalem in the eschaton. The vision reports of 1–6 allude to Priestly traditions in Exodus. Zechariah 9–14 in particular also shows an awareness of other canonical texts, especially the Genesis creation stories in Zechariah 12 and 14. In short, the developing sense of canon and more sophisticated use of other texts play a significant role in the canonical form of Zechariah.

The Message of Zechariah

Zechariah addresses new beginnings, first with a message of hope for the community of Jerusalem and the cult in the early postexilic period and then with a less optimistic exploration of the fate of

Israel and Judah. After reporting that the people repented (1:2-6), especially when read in conjunction with Haggai, Zechariah's visions and sayings lay out a program for the community in the aftermath of a pronouncement of peace and YHWH's decision to return to Jerusalem (the first two vision reports). This program involves the shared power of the high priest and the governor, with the former taking a more prominent role. Further, the visions focus heavily on the temple symbols and the role of ethical living in Judah and Jerusalem. The sayings of chapters 7–8 provide promises of YHWH's presence, admonitions for ethical living, and interpretations of the past as punishment from YHWH. The underlying expectations of these sayings presume the nation stands at a pivotal point in the story. Things have begun to change, and that should be cause for rejoicing (8:9-12). But the fact that these admonitions need to be addressed suggests that trouble is on the horizon. With the construction of the temple underway, the people of Jerusalem and Judah have a chance to begin the story anew, and the prophetic admonition urges the people to get it right this time. By the time one gets to Malachi, one will find things have gone wrong again and the prophetic admonition turns to confrontation. Prior to Malachi, however, Zechariah 9–14 presents a very different picture of the more distant future.

The last chapters of Zechariah extend the vision from the time of the temple construction to the portrayal of the future for YHWH's people and the nations. The optimism of chapters 1–8, however, gives way to a message of enduring threat against the remnant who survives the coming day of YHWH. In their final form, these chapters do not give a simple picture. Rather, they juxtapose scenarios against one another. Ephraim is praised as working in concert with Judah (9:13) and as a part of YHWH's salvific plan for resettlement (10:6-12), but is then rejected as part of the covenant people (11:14). Jerusalem is portrayed as being protected by YHWH from the nations (9:1-17), but also as nearly demolished by YHWH using the nations (12:1-5, 14:1-2)—that is, before YHWH defeats the nations and purifies both Jerusalem (14:3-15) and a remnant of the nations (14:16-21). Judah's king arrives in peace (9:9-10), but soon the leaders of the country are condemned as worthless (11:4-17). **[Cycle of Violence]** In short, the images of 9–14 reflect a chaotic collection of texts that cannot be pinned down to convey a clear image or a unifying vision. Rather, these passages seem to

Cycle of Violence

The text of Zech 12 graphically depicts a scenario about the devastation of war, even in the aftermath of an eschatological judgment. Following 9-11 a few artists offered similar words of caution, as in this song by Carrie Newcomer, a song about the cycle of violence that results when religion becomes sick.

I heard an owl call last night
Homeless and confused
I stood naked and bewildered
By the evil people do
Up upon a hill there is a terrible sign
That tells the story of what darkness waits
When we leave the light behind.

Don't tell me hate is ever right or God's will
These are the wheels we put in motion ourselves
The whole world weeps and is weeping still
Though shaken I still believe
the best of what we all can be
The only peace this world will know
Can only come from love.

I am a voice calling out
Across the great divide

I am only one person
That feels they have to try
The questions fall like trees or dust
Rise like prayers above
But the only word is "Courage"
And the only answer " Love"

Light ever candle that you can
For we need some light to see
In the face of deepest loss,
Treat each other tenderly
The arms of god will gather in
Every sparrow that falls
And makes no separation
Just fiercely loves us all.

Carrie Newcomer, "I Heard an Owl," *The Gathering of Spirits*, 2002.
Used by permission.

share only one consistent hermeneutical thrust: specifically, no matter what trials the people of Jerusalem face, be they external or internal, some portion of Judah and Jerusalem will endure. Perhaps these chapters offer a multitude of images for the coming day of YHWH precisely because of the unknown threats confronting Jerusalem at the end of the Persian period or the early Hellenistic period.

NOTES

1. See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8* (AB 25B; Garden City: Doubleday, 1987) XLI.

2. Much hinges on the competing introductions to the appearance of the prophet in Haggai. See Hans Walter Wolff, *Haggai: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 18–20. Of the few exceptions one should note Peter Ackroyd and W. A. M. Beuken. Both date the second editorial hand in Haggai about a century later by placing the final editing in the milieu of the Chronicler, though both present the Chronicler as a tradition group, or tradent, rather than a single author. See Peter Ackroyd, "Studies in the Book of Haggai," *JJS* 2 (1950–51): 163–76; *JJS* 3 (1951–52): 1–13; and "The Book of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8," *JJS* 4 (1952–53): 151–56; W. A. M. Beuken, *Haggai–Sacharja 1–8: Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte*

der frühnachexilischen Prophetie (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 10; Assen: van Gorcum, 1967) 173–83.

3. The most extensive treatment to date of the tradition-historical relationship between the two writings is that of Beuken in *Haggai–Sacharja 1–8*.

4. The turning point for this argument came in the influential article of Bernhard Stade, “Deuterozacharia. Eine kritische Studie,” *ZAW* 1 (1881): 1–96.

5. Karl Elliger, “Ein Zeugnis aus der jüdische Gemeinde im Alexanderjahr 332 v.Chr,” *ZAW* 62 (1950): 63–115.

6. See Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Volume 2: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (trans. John Bowden; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 566–67.

7. Otto Plöger, *Theocracy and Eschatology* (trans. S. Rudman; original, 1959; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968); Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

8. See especially the treatment by Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1993) 35–45 (especially charts 7, 9–10), which shows just how extensive and varied these intertextual links can be.

9. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 15–29. See also Paul L. Redditt (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* [NCB; London: Marshall Pickering, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995] 94–102), who sees the time before Nehemiah as the general time frame against which to read 9–14. Redditt suggests a more protracted time frame because the sources used to piece these chapters together represent texts from different times.

10. See the survey of the reigns of the Persian kings in Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, vol. 1, *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T & T Clark, 2004) 265–69, 290–92, 322–24.

11. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 18–22.

12. See Grabbe, *Yehud*, 295–98. Grabbe cites recent surveys suggesting these fortresses were part of a general policy of Persia, not a response to a specific threat. Thus, the fortresses cannot likely be assigned to the same period, and one also has to question whether Judah played as strong a military role as Meyers and Meyers suggest. Compare the view of Meyers and Meyers, who present Egypt and Yehud as “especially important for strategic purposes” (*Zechariah 9–14*, 17), with the conclusion of Grabbe, who sees Yehud as “a not-wealthy province in a rather out-of-the-way part of the empire” (*Yehud*, 154).

13. See especially the works of Paul L. Redditt, “Israel’s Shepherds: Hope and Pessimism in Zechariah 9–14,” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 631–42; and “The Two Shepherds in Zechariah 11:4–17,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 676–86; David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 128–33; Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 384–97, 404–406; James D. Nogalski, “Zechariah 13:7–9 as a Transitional Text: An Appreciation and Re-evaluation of the Work of Rex Mason,” in *Bringing Out the Treasure: Inner Biblical Allusion in Zechariah 9–14* (ed. Mark J. Boda and Michael H. Floyd; JSOTSup 370; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 292–304. By contrast, Wöhrle sees the shepherd materials as part of a thematically more coherent early portion of Deutero-Zechariah (Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss der Zwölfprophetenbuches: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* [BZAW 389; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008] 67–134).

14. See, for example, James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 213–47 and James D. Nogalski, “Zechariah 13:7-9: An Appreciation and Re-evaluation of the Work of Rex Mason,” in *Bringing out the Treasure*, 292–304.

15. Wöhrle, for example, develops a model for Zechariah 9–14 wherein new material expands on Zech 1–8 (and eventually Malachi) from the early Persian to the early Hellenistic periods. See Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss der Zwölfprophetenbuches*, 67–134, 441–44.

16. For example, Nogalski, “Zechariah 13:7-9,” in *Bringing out the Treasure*, 292–304 (especially 301–304); Aaron Scharf, *Die Entstehung des des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftenebergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 256–57, 275–77; Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 102–103. Nogalski and Scharf treat most of Zech 9–14 as the work of a single editorial composition using existing sources as part of the development of the Book of the Twelve. Redditt argues that Zech 14 was added at a later point, but sees this work as part of the process of compiling the Twelve, a position that Nogalski also articulated in an earlier work (*Redactional Processes*, 213–41). See also Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 23–29; Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 32–50, 52–59; and Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville MN; Michael Glazier, 2000) 2:565–67. In various ways, these commentators also presuppose this model, but they do not really address the relationship of these chapters to the Book of the Twelve.

17. See Erich Bosshard-Nepustil, *Rezeptionen von Jesaja 1–39 in Zwölfprophetenbuch: Untersuchungen zur literarischen Verbindung von Prophetenbüchern in babylonischer und persischer Zeit* (OBO 154; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) 428–31; Odil Hannes Steck, *Der Abschluß der Prophetie im Alten Testament: Ein Versuch zur Frage der Vorgeschichte des Konons* (Biblich-Theologische Studien 17; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1991); Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss der Zwölfprophetenbuches*, 67–134, 441–44. Bosshard-Nepustil finds a redactional layer that begins by attaching 9:1–10:2 between Zechariah 8 and Malachi in the time of Alexander, but the remaining material is not treated, except to say it comes later. Steck concurs and takes the redactional development further with at least five redactional layers involved in the developing corpus. See Steck’s summary in *Abschluß der Prophetie*, 196–98. Wöhrle finds seven redactional layers in 9–14 but only treats certain portions of the later redactional layers as concerned with the Book of the Twelve, while the remaining portions developed while the corpus was independent.

18. This debate does not line up with the question of the compilational or developmental models, as a quick survey of the scholars in the previous notes will verify. For example, while Scharf and Nogalski see 9–14 as a compilation rather than a developing corpus, they disagree on whether it entered the Book of the Twelve before or after Malachi. Similarly, Bosshard-Nepustil and Wöhrle agree with one another that 9–14 developed as a series of redactional continuations, but they disagree on whether Malachi was already present before the bulk of 9–14 entered the corpus.

19. These redactional studies are found in Nogalski, “Zechariah 13:7-9,” 292–304, and Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, 213–47.

20. For examples of various types of intertextual ties between Zech 9–14 and other texts, see the lengthy chart in Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 41–43. The intertextual connectors listed there may include quotes and allusions as well as shared idioms and themes.

OUTLINE OF ZECHARIAH

- I. Zechariah 1:1-6: Successful Sermon on Repentance
- II. Zechariah 1:7–6:15: The Night Visions of Zechariah
 - A. 1:7-17: The “Man” among the Myrtles
 - B. 1:18-21: The Four Horns
 - C. 2:1-13: The “Man” with the Measuring Line
 - D. 3:1-10: Joshua, the High Priest
 - E. 4:1-14: The Lampstand
 - F. 5:1-4: The Flying Scroll
 - G. 5:5-11: The Ephah (Basket)
 - H. 6:1-15: Four Chariots and Horses
- III. Zechariah 7:1–8:23: Sayings for the Delegation from Bethel
 - A. 7:1-3: Shall We Continue to Mourn?
 - B. 7:4-7: Examine Your Hearts
 - C. 7:8-14: A Lesson from History to Act Ethically
 - D. 8:1-17: YHWH Is on Our Side
 - 1. 8:1-2: I Am Jealous for Zion
 - 2. 8:3: I Will Return to Zion and Jerusalem
 - 3. 8:4-5: The City Will Be Filled with Young and Old
 - 4. 8:6: Do You Think this Is Too Difficult for YHWH?
 - 5. 8:7-8: My People Will Inhabit Jerusalem in Truth and Righteousness
 - 6. 8:9-13: The Past Has Implications for the Present and the Future
 - 7. 8:14-17: Judgment in the Past; Call for Truth and Justice in the Present
 - E. 8:18-23: Responses to the Questions of the Samaritan Delegation
 - 1. 8:18-19: The Time for All Mourning Is Past
 - 2. 8:20-22: The Nations Will Come to Judah to Worship
 - 3. 8:23: The Nations Will Find Salvation through Judeans
- IV. Zechariah 9:1-17: YHWH Defends the Territory
 - A. 9:1-8: YHWH Defends the Borders
 - B. 9:9-10: The King Comes to Jerusalem in Peace
 - C. 9:11-13: Battling the Greeks
 - D. 9:14-17: Battle Leads to Victory
- V. Zechariah 10:1–11:3: Reconstituting Judah and Israel
 - A. 10:1-2: Ask for Rain
 - B. 10:3-6: Failure of Leaders and Hope for the Kingdom

- C. 10:7-12: The Return of Ephraim
- D. 11:1-3: Retaking Lost Territory
- VI. Zechariah 11:4-17: The Enigmatic Shepherds
- VII. Zechariah 12:1-14: Eschatological Victory and Mourning
 - A. 12:1: Superscription for Zechariah 12–14
 - B. 12:2-11: Victory Over the Nations “On that Day”
 - C. 12:12-14: Jerusalem Mourns the One Fallen
- VIII. Zechariah 13:1-9: Cleansing, Judging, Delivering
 - A. 13:1: From Mourning to Cleansing
 - B. 13:2-6: The End of Idolatry, Prophets, and Unclean Spirit
 - C. 13:7-9: A Remnant Will Survive
- IX. Zechariah 14:1-21: The Day of YHWH Revisited
 - A. 14:1-5: Battles on the Day of YHWH
 - B. 14:6-11: The Re-creation of the Land
 - C. 14:12-15: Plague and Panic on the Nations
 - D. 14:16-19: Hope for a Remnant among the Nations
 - E. 14:20-21: A Pure and Holy Jerusalem

A SERMON REPORT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPENTANCE

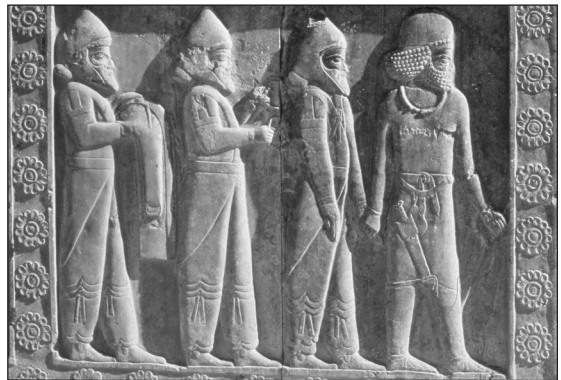
Zechariah 1:1-6

COMMENTARY

The first two units of Zechariah begin with date formulas (1:1, 7) that set the subsequent units of the book (1:1-6; 1:7-6:15) in specific times during the second year of Darius of Persia's reign (520 BCE; for discussion of Darius, see Hag 1:1). The first unit (1:1-6) provides a sermon report that summarizes the gist of a sermon delivered by the prophet to the people. The report contains three sections: the date formula (1:1), the summary of the sermon (1:2-6a), and the people's response (1:6b). As well, the first and last sections provide a narrative frame, while the middle section contains a series of direct addresses.

The date formula in Zechariah 1:1 is one of three dated headings in Zechariah (1:1, 7; 7:1), and like Haggai, the formulas appear in chronological order. This first date formula, however, differs from the others. It lists only the month and year in which the speech was delivered, not the day (cf. Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20; Zech 1:7; 7:1). Specifically, the date sets the opening message of the book in October/November 520 BCE (see Hag 1:1). Thus, the date of Zechariah 1:1 overlaps the dates in Haggai, coming between the speech begun in Haggai 2:1 and those dates in Haggai 2:10, 18, 20 (see [\[Date Formulas\]](#) in the discussion of Haggai).

Relief of Darius



Detail of the relief on the staircase of the Palace of Darius the Great at Persepolis, showing four figures in procession, holding various objects, and rosettes that frame the scene. (Credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

Zechariah 1:1 contains a word event formula (the word of YHWH came to . . .) that contains strong connotations of prophetic authority (see Hos 1:1). The formula also introduces the prophet Zechariah, whose genealogy is then traced back to his grandfather. This genealogy of Zechariah is at odds with other biblical texts giving Zechariah's genealogy, but it probably has the stronger historical claim in that his father was Berechiah and his

Genealogy of Zechariah



Zech 1:1, 7 call Zechariah “the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo,” meaning he is the grandson of Iddo. Elsewhere, Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 call Zechariah simply “the son of Iddo.” Ezra relied on the Nehemiah tradition that Zechariah was the son of Iddo. Therefore, since the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah are closely linked, and since Nehemiah lists a man named Iddo with a son Zechariah (Neh 12:4, 16) as one of the priests who returned with Zerubbabel, it appears plausible that Ezra assumes these were the same persons. There is, however, a general consensus that Haggai and Zechariah were recorded closer to the time when these prophets lived. The early recording, combined with the tendency to telescope genealogies over time, strongly suggests that Zechariah's tradition is more historically accurate.

grandfather was Iddo. [Genealogy of Zechariah] Confusion about the prophet also exists in the relatively few traditions about Zechariah in rabbinic tradition. (See [Zechariah in Jewish Tradition].)

Zechariah 1:2-3 describes the starting point of the sermon in which the prophet addresses the congregation: “YHWH was very angry with your [2mp] ancestors.” It soon becomes clear that the references to ancestors (lit., “fathers”) refer to the generation at the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 587 BCE nearly seventy years earlier.

Zechariah 1:3 builds on 1:2 by offering a call to repentance, which formally addresses the prophet, instructing him to speak to the people

(“Therefore, say [2ms] to them”), and is introduced with the messenger formula (“Thus says YHWH”). The narrator accentuates the divine speaker twice with “utterance of the LORD of hosts.” The call to repent comes right to the point: “Return to me . . . and I will return to you [2mp].” The plural address indicates that these words are intended for the people. YHWH offers the current generation a chance to change the situation that has reigned since Jerusalem's destruction.

The call to the current generation (1:3) leads to an admonition not to be like the previous generation (1:4-6a). When the former prophets issued a call to repent, the earlier generation paid no heed (1:4). [The Former Prophets] A series of rhetorical questions then challenges Zechariah's generation not to make the same mistake. One must hear the questions *and* their assumed answers in order to understand what is at stake: “Your ancestors, where are they?” *Dead!* “And the prophets, do they live forever?” *No!* “But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants, the prophets, did they not overtake your ancestors?” *Yes!* These rhetorical questions drive home the point that the previous generations did not

repent. They had their chance to change, but failed to take advantage of the opportunity.

The passage concludes with a return to the narrator's voice: "So they repented and said" This half verse has often been treated as a report about the previous generation's ultimate return to YHWH, but this interpretation creates tensions within the larger unit. Given that the entire thrust to this point has focused on the previous generations' failure to heed God's call (see especially 1:4), the reference to "they" in this report makes better sense as a reference to Zechariah's generation. In essence, the narrator reports that the prophet's audience acknowledges that their situation resulted from the way their ancestors had turned their backs on YHWH. Moreover, this positive response of the people also fits with the flow of Haggai and Zechariah, where the people gradually appear to buy into constructing the temple more as Haggai unfolds. The beginning of the temple construction means, however, that something has changed since Haggai began (see 1:2-11, where the people and leaders had paid no attention to the temple) and Haggai 2:10-23 (where temple construction begins "on this day"). The superscription in Zechariah 1:1 (in the eighth month) occurs between the dates of Haggai 2:1 (twenty-first day of the seventh month) and Haggai 2:10 (twenty-fourth day of the ninth month). Thus, Zechariah dovetails with Haggai in terms of the dates of the speeches, meaning that the date of the people's repentance in Zechariah 1:2-6 actually precedes the beginning of the temple construction.

The Former Prophets



The identity of the former prophets depends on the perspective one adopts when reading this unit. In Zechariah, the case can be made that the referenced group was the generation at the time of Jerusalem's destruction (e.g., Jer 3:12, 14, 22; Ezek 14:6; 18:30; 33:11). For the reader of the Book of the Twelve, however, reference to "your ancestors" has a broader function. The first three books contain a significant number (45) of occurrences of the verb *šûb* ("return," "repent"), to the point where one could say the verb functions as a *Leitmotiv*. The book of Zechariah returns to a rather large number (18) of occurrences of this verb. Similarly, the command (i.e., an imperative verb) to repent/return appears in Hosea (14:2-3) and Joel (2:12-13), the first two books, and Zechariah (1:3-4; 9:12) and Malachi (3:7), the last two books of the Book of the Twelve. Note also the significance of this verb in Amos 4:6-11. In this respect, when the reader of the Twelve hears that the call to repent was ignored, that reader recalls that the message to repent began earlier in the story. The books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos record in powerful ways the offers God had made to the ancestors that called them to repentance.

CONNECTIONS

God has a long memory but often refuses to use it. In other words, the Old Testament presents God as willing to forgive God's people if they turn back to God. In many ways, the story of the Old

“Repent” in the Modern World

AQ The Hebrew word *šûb* does not literally mean “repent.” The word means “turn around” and is translated as repent in certain theological contexts on the assumption that a person or a community is headed away from YHWH and needs to “turn around” and return to walk toward YHWH. Modern hearers may associate the word “repent” with emotional altar calls, with evangelists pleading for a congregant to “walk the aisle” and demonstrate their contrition with tears and sobs. The Hebrew term is not associated with such images in Hebrew. Rather, it assumes that communities of faith or individuals of faith should desire to “walk in the path” of YHWH, but they have chosen instead to walk a path that leads to calamity. The call to “turn around” or to “repent” in this sense, then, means to begin acting differently. The word *šûb* means to change behavior, not walk the aisle and make a public show of remorse.

Testament is the story of God inviting each generation to repent and return as though it was the first group to turn their back on God. [**“Repent” in the Modern World**] On the one hand, this selective memory means that each generation, and each group of God’s people, is continually challenged by God’s expectations that they turn from a life of self-centered, self-serving behavior to a life that seeks to walk along God’s paths. In short, God’s people should seek to live a life of love and service in the name of God. On the other hand, few of us qualify for sainthood. In this respect, we too benefit from God’s short-term memory. God’s love is such that God willingly offers individuals and groups chances to return to God, even when we have failed in the past. Every now and then, God’s attempts to show grace rather than extract justice actually pay off,

especially when someone or some group accepts that call and comes to God in genuine repentance.

Sadly, Zechariah 1:6 is the only place in the Book of the Twelve where the call for God’s people to repent is explicitly reported as having met with a positive response. In every other instance, the response of God’s people to this call is either left ambiguous (e.g., Hos 14:1-9; Joel 2:12-14; Mal 3:6-12) or fails (Amos 4:6-11). In Jonah, ironically, the foreigners turn to God at the prophet’s call to repent, while the prophet of Israel defies God, begrudgingly repents, and then resents that God would have compassion on Israel’s enemies. Only Zechariah 1:6 presents an instance of God’s people as a group repenting before YHWH. What would the church look like if we, as individuals and as congregations, began to turn to God, to put aside our inclinations to act for our own benefit, and to ask how we might serve God? The church might begin to look and act very differently.

THE NIGHT VISIONS OF ZECHARIAH

Zechariah 1:7–6:15

The next major unit of Zechariah runs from 1:7–6:15. It comprises a series of eight vision reports, often labeled the “night visions of Zechariah” (see 1:8). For the most part, these vision reports present variations on a similar four-part pattern. [Four-part Pattern to Zechariah’s Visions] The common elements of these reports include a portrayal of the vision image; the prophet’s question about the meaning of the image; an explanation of the significance of the image; and oracular material related to the setting.

These vision reports, and their accompanying information, are delineated as follows:

Four-part Pattern to Zechariah’s Visions

 Four elements (listed in the left column) repeat throughout the visions.

Vision Elements	1:8-17	1:18-21	2:1-13	3:1-10	4:1-14	5:1-4	5:5-11	6:1-15
Image(s)	1:8: Man	1:18: 4 Horns 1:20: Craftsmen	2:1: Man with line	3:1: Joshua (different style)	4:2: Lamp and stand	5:1-2: Flying Scroll	5:5: Ephah (basket) 5:7: a woman 5:9: two women	6:1-3: Four chariots and horses
Question(s)	1:9a	1:19	2:2a	X	4:4, 11-12	X	5:6a X 5:10	6:4
Explanation(s)	1:9b-15	1:19 1:21	2:2b-5	X	4:5-6a, 13-14	5:3	5:6b 5:8 5:11	6:5-8
Oracle(s)	1:16, 17	X	2:6-9 2:10-12	3:6-10	4:6b-10	5:4	X	6:9-15?

- 1:8-17: The “Man” among the Myrtles
- 1:18-21: The Four Horns
- 2:1-13: The “Man” with the Measuring Line
- 3:1-10: Joshua, the High Priest
- 4:1-14: The Lampstand
- 5:1-4: The Flying Scroll
- 5:5-11: The Ephah (Basket)
- 6:1-15: Four Chariots and Horses

All except the fourth vision report (3:1-10) contain at least three of the elements of the pattern.

According to 1:7, these visions are set in the evening of the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month in the second year of Darius (February 15, 519 BCE). The visions cease with the appearance of a new date formula in 7:1 (the fourth day of the ninth month in the fourth year of Darius) that sets the sayings in Zechariah 7–8 nearly two years later.

THE “MAN” AMONG THE MYRTLES

Zechariah 1:7-17

COMMENTARY

Zechariah 1:7-17 contains a chronological note (1:7) and a vision report (1:8-18). The chronological note sets the vision sequence three months after the sermon report of 1:2-6 and is dated to the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month of the second year of Darius (February 15, 519). Zechariah 1:7 also contains a word event formula and genealogy, identical to 1:1, that transition into the vision report proper that starts with 1:8.

This first vision report divides into two parts: the description of the mounted patrols and their report (1:8-11) and the reported conversation between YHWH and the “angel of the LORD” (1:12-17). The first vision report unfolds gradually. At first, 1:8 portrays the object of the vision as simply “a man riding upon a horse” with a group of riders behind him on different-colored horses. The next verse reveals more of this man’s identity by calling him an “angel.” By 1:11, one learns that he is also a being of some importance, for those who had been patrolling the earth have gathered to report to him. Later, it is this unnamed angel who is called “the angel of YHWH” (1:11).

The colors of the horses have given rise to much speculation. [\[Colors of the Horses\]](#) There is little agreement over whether these colors have any significance, but colored horses do play a significant role in the first and last visions. Zechariah 1:8 also contains the only explicit temporal statement in the entire

Colors of the Horses



Recent suggestions tend to focus on the suitability of these colors (red, sorrel, and white) as the colors of a sunset and sunrise, the colors of the myrtle tree, or merely a range of colors suitable for horses. The final vision also returns to the presentation of (chariots and) colored horses (6:1-3: red, black, dappled, and white). This combination of horses at the beginning and end seems to create a frame marking the beginning and end of the vision cycle. In the first vision, the horses and their riders are returning from patrolling the earth. In the final vision, the chariots and their horses are preparing to go forth to patrol the earth. This *inclusio*, combined with the tasks of coming and going, suggests that the entire cycle should be seen as a series of visions received over the course of a single night (see 1:8).

Seventy Years



The reference to seventy years is more than just a reference to the approximate length of time from the exile to the restoration. Three Jeremiah texts (Jer 25:10-11; 29:10; 33:14) explore interrelated aspects of the 70-year judgment: the pronouncement of the 70-year judgment (25:10-11), a pronouncement of Babylon's destruction and the return of the exiles after 70 years (29:10-11), and a reiteration of the promise emphasizing the restoration of Israel and Judah (33:14). Linguistic connectors suggest that Zech 1:13 was not merely working from the isolated recollection of a single verse. Jer 33:14 also alludes to the 70-year judgment (25:10-11)-turned-promise (29:10-11) with its allusion to the "good word" that YHWH will deliver when the time of promise arrives: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will bring about the *good word* I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This reference to the "good word(s)" appears only three places in all of prophetic literature: Jer 29:10; 33:14; and Zech 1:13 (plural). It would hardly appear accidental that when YHWH is asked how long the 70-year indignation will continue in Zech 1:12, he responds with the "good words" associated with an end to the 70-year judgment as in Jer 29:10. By alluding to the Jeremiah promise, Zech 1 is calling attention to its fulfillment in the time of Zechariah.

cycle when it refers to the nighttime as the setting. This reference suggests that all eight visions should be understood as a series of visions taking place in one evening.

The action develops following the prophet's question about what he sees (1:9). The vision proper introduces an extended conversation. The prophet refers to the angel using a title of respect that indicates deference ("my lord"). The prophet asks, "What are these?" There appear to be two responses. In the first response (1:9), the angel does not tell him, but promises, "I will show you what they are." The second response (1:10) takes up the prophet's question: "So the man who was standing among the myrtles answered and said" In 1:10b, the prophet and the reader learn that the group of riders are those whom YHWH has sent out to patrol the earth to ascertain its status. The message of the patrol is that the earth is at peace (1:11).

The second part of the vision report continues the conversational style, but the primary conversation partners are now the angel of the LORD and the LORD. This section has a clear structure: the angel petitions YHWH (1:12), YHWH then offers a comforting response to the angel (1:13),

and then the angel delivers YHWH's message to the prophet (14-17).

In 1:12, the angel of the Lord, who has been speaking with the prophet, now petitions YHWH: "How long, O LORD, will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?" [Seventy Years] In

Two Themes in Zechariah 1:14-15



Two themes are present in these verses, introduced by similar formulas.

Messenger formula + affirmation: I am jealous for Zion and Jerusalem (1:14) and angry with the nations who made the situation worse (1:15).

Messenger formula + new initiative: *therefore* I will rebuild the temple (1:16), Jerusalem (1:16), and the cities (1:17).

Zechariah 1:14-17, the angel relays YHWH's response to this petition to the prophet. Notably, the response introduces two themes, each initiated by a new messenger formula.

[Two Themes in Zechariah 1:14-15] Two issues are raised and linked together in the affirmation: (a) the state of

Jerusalem, Judah, and the cities; (b) punishment of the nations who had furthered the problem. The first issue raised in 1:14 is the subject of YHWH's new initiative in 1:16-17, while the second issue raised in 1:15 is the subject of the second vision report in 1:18-21. In short, YHWH's compassionate response as reported by the messenger thus serves to link visions 1 and 2. Both of these visions follow upon the sermon report of 1:2-6, where the people's repentance has been recounted.

CONNECTIONS

This first vision report allows the prophet to convey to his audience two important conversations. The first conversation (1:11) indicates that the world is at rest, meaning there are no political threats that demand action. The second conversation (1:14-17) reports YHWH's promise to restore the temple, Jerusalem, and Judah to a position of importance.

In this vision report, the prophet is an observer who participates only when he needs information to understand what he is seeing. Intercession takes place from the "angel of YHWH" who utters a question usually associated with complaint songs (1:12: "How long, YHWH?"). The prophet receives a message of compassion (1:13) that also conveys several things about God. First, God's character involves compassion, not capricious confrontation. Second, this God fulfills promises, even when those promises involve punishment. The allusion to the seventy-year period of punishment (1:12) reminds those familiar with the biblical story that this conversation takes place as part of a longer relationship between a parent and a wayward child. That history is not retold, but it is assumed. Third, God does not give up on seeking goodness from the people of God. Seventy years of punishment may seem like a long time by human standards, but God operates on God's own terms. When this generation repents (1:6b), God ends the period of punishment. Fourth, God ultimately holds all accountable for their actions. God used other nations to punish Judah and Jerusalem, yet since they overstepped the bounds of what they were supposed to do (1:15), these nations would now have to face God's punishment too.

Angels in the Ancient Near East



The role of angels in ancient Semitic literature is complex and quite different from images of angels in popular imagination today. For further reading on the cultural context of angels in the ancient Near East, see the following:

Cho, Sang Youl. *Lesser Deities in the Ugaritic Texts and the Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Study of Their Nature and Roles*. Deities and Angels of the Ancient World 2. Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2007.

Collins, John J. "The Sage in the Apocalyptic and Pseudepigraphic Literature." *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Edited by John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990. 343–54.

Conrad, Edgar W. "The End of Prophecy and the Appearance of Angels/Messengers in the Book of the Twelve." *JSOT* 73 (1997): 65–79.

Delkert, H. "Die Engelwesen in Sach 1,8–15." *Biblische Notizen* 99 (1999): 20–41.

Reed, Annette Yoshiko. *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Reiterer, Friedrich V., Tobias Nicklas, and Karin Schöpflin, editors. *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings—Origins, Development and Reception*. Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook 2007 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).

Visions of angelic conversations concerning the fate of the world make many people uncomfortable. [Angels in the Ancient Near East] What does this prophetic vision report offer for today's believers? Affirmations of God's purposes and attributes can certainly comfort those who have experienced lengthy periods of exile, banishment, or suffering. God did not abandon this people; God does not abandon believers today. Just as significantly, God's justice and compassion offer words of hope and warning. Specifically, God's people in Zechariah have changed (1:2-6), thereby opening the way for God's compassion to manifest itself.

This change, however, did not occur magically or immediately. More than two months had passed since Zechariah's sermon led to the people's repentance. In two more years, the prophet would need to remind people how far they had come in their process of restoration (Zech 8:9-12; cf. 7:1). Still, the message is clear. God reacts positively to genuine changes in the lives of people (whether individuals or groups). Conversely, they should not mistake what appears to be God's silence for God's approval or a lack of concern. During this period of punishment, several nations have taken advantage of

the predicament of Jerusalem and Judah. Consequently, YHWH intends to deal with these groups (1:15; cf. 1:18-21). In the end, humanity is free to act as it chooses, but choices have consequences. Acting on one's own with no thought of what God desires is self-serving and leads to disaster in the long run, even when it seems "successful" in the short term. Those countries that had taken advantage of the situation will receive YHWH's justice for their actions. The warning cannot be ignored.

THE FOUR HORNS

Zechariah 1:18-21 (MT 2:1-4)

COMMENTARY

Zechariah's second vision takes up the theme, first introduced in 1:15, of the punishment of the nations. This vision report names two objects—"horns" in 1:18 and "blacksmiths" in 1:20—that are immediately followed by two questions from prophet—"What are these?" (1:19) and "What are they coming to do?" (1:21). The explanations from the angel (1:19, 21) regarding these items are interrelated and serve to unify the two images into a single vision report.

The prophet first sees four horns. **[Four Horns]** The word for "horn" here is not the ram's horn (*šôfar*), but the word *qeren*, which can be (1) a generic term for animal horns, (2) extruding corners that stick out like horns, or (3) a metaphor for power. The angel interprets these horns as the nations who scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem (1:19). Occasionally, scholars identify the four horns as specific countries associated with the destruction and exile of Judah. Candidates include Assyria and Babylon (but they have disappeared from the scene), Egypt (but it was not directly involved), Edom, Tyre, and even Persia. More often, scholars treat the four horns as symbols of all nations much as one speaks of the four corners of the earth.

In the second part of the vision report (1:20-21), the prophet sees four craftsmen (*ḥārāšîm*) who have come to terrify the nations who had acted against Judah. The NRSV translates the term as "blacksmiths," implying metal workers. However, this word is used for those working in wood (2 Sam 5:11; 2 Kgs 12:12; 22:6), stone (Exod

Four Horns

The visualization of the four horns has been understood variously, with some seeing the four horns as a symbol signifying power (as in 1 Sam 2:1, 10; 2 Sam 22:3; Lam 2:3; Ezek 29:21; Ps 132:17; Ps 75:11; Job 16:15). Others see the horns as symbolizing the four-horned altar of the temple compound, a symbol perhaps implying the slaughter of the four nations. This altar would have been used for animal sacrifice and would have looked similar to one unearthed at Beersheva.

28:11; 2 Sam 5:11; 1 Chr 14:11), and metals of various types (1 Sam 13:19; 2 Chr 34:11). For this reason, and given that they are coming to work on the four horns, “craftsmen” or “artisans” better connotes the variety of tasks performed by such persons. The point of the vision is clear. These four craftsmen have been sent by YHWH to terrify and reshape the nations who have wrought havoc on Judah.

The second vision report thus conveys in more detail—symbolic though it may be—YHWH’s punishment of the nations, a topic raised in YHWH’s response to the angel’s plea in 1:15. These nations, symbolized as horns, have scattered Judah and humiliated it by their actions (1:21). Thus, YHWH has decided to exact justice on these nations for their willful disregard of Judah’s plight during their time of punishment.

CONNECTIONS

The Bible does not shy away from pronouncements regarding God’s involvement in the political realm. Zechariah’s second vision predicts God’s retribution on foreign nations as a form of comfort to the people of Judah who had wondered whether their God had abandoned them. Several points should be born in mind when considering how this message applies to life today. First, God enters the picture to help those who are oppressed, not to strengthen the powerful. Judah at the end of the sixth century was not a powerful regional force but a small, impoverished country that was just starting to rebuild.

Second, God expects nations to behave toward one another in particular ways according to prophetic texts. The connection of this vision with the opening conversation is critical to bear in mind. On the one hand, Judah had abandoned YHWH, who in turn punished the country by allowing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and exile most of its population. In other words, according to numerous Old Testament texts, God used other nations to punish Judah and Israel. On the other hand, God expected those nations to act within certain limits, and when they failed to do so God acted to punish those nations for acting as though they were gods unto themselves. (See Isaiah 10 for Assyria and Jeremiah 50 for Elam and Babylon.) In this second vision, the four horns will be

punished because they scattered and humiliated Judah. However, neither the second vision nor the conversation that introduced it (1:15) specify the exact crimes committed by these nations. Consequently, one must hear this accusation in light of other texts (e.g., Joel 3:9-13 [surrounding nations]; Obad 9-15 [Edom]; Hab 1:5-11 [Babylon]). In short, God does not hold other nations to a double standard. God expects justice and order from all nations.

Third, God decides the time for justice and compassion. God's messengers have patrolled the earth and found it at peace (Zech 1:11). It is this situation that allows for the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem in the first place, but it also simultaneously prompts God to announce judgment on those nations who had acted against Judah.

How do these observations help provide a means for applying this vision? First, they invite believers to ask questions. "How does God want our country to act?" Particularly, this question has been the theological basis for those engaged in human rights issues. "What is just behavior for nations toward their own people and toward other nations?" Even in ancient days, civilizations thought national power had limits. Amos, the eighth-century prophet, condemned foreign kingdoms for war

crimes, not for religious practices. But Amos condemned Judah for not obeying God's law (2:4-5) and Israel for ignoring the poor (2:7). Jesus confronts "nations" (Matt 25:32) with the question, "How have you treated the least of these, my brethren?" As a nation, we in the United States tend to call on God in desperate times, but we often ignore the call to improve life for others, especially when it does not suit our economic self-interests. This vision reminds us that God expects each nation to act justly and to act so

Imagining Angels

Artists depicting angels reflect cultural expectations. Consider the image here, for example. These angels, young cherubs with round smiling faces, convey a sense of innocence and joy. Contrast this image with the images in Zech 1 of angels patrolling the heavens with chariots and horses. Ancient Near Eastern depictions of angelic figures often depict military roles for these beings.



Jacob de Wit (1695–1754). *Goden in het luchtruim* (*Gods in the Sky*) (detail). Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. (Credit: thedogg, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLANL_-_thedogg_-_Goden_in_het_luchtruim,_Jacob_de_Wit_-_detail.jpg)

that the plight of the poor is alleviated. Figuring out what that means in concrete terms, while sometimes difficult, should at least be attempted.

THE “MAN” WITH THE MEASURING LINE

Zechariah 2:1-13 (MT 2:5-17)

COMMENTARY

Zechariah 2:1-13 exhibits a structure similar to the majority of the vision reports, with the exception that this third vision report contains two interrelated oracles. [The Structure of Zechariah 2:1-13] The first three elements (2:1-5) progress relatively seamlessly, while the last three (2:6-13) demand careful attention to changing addressees. This third report continues to deal with the dual themes introduced in the first vision report: YHWH’s compassion on Jerusalem and punishment of the nations. The focus in 2:1-13, however, is on the implications that YHWH’s decision to punish the nations (specifically, Babylon) will have on Jerusalem. YHWH sends advance warning to the exiles living in Babylon so that they may return to Jerusalem before he destroys the city. The implications are twofold: Jerusalem’s population is expected to swell, and YHWH intends to act decisively against Babylon.

In Zechariah 2:1 the prophet sees a man with a “cord of measurement.” This language is reminiscent of the plumb line in Amos 7:7-9, but the salvific implications of Zechariah’s vision contrast with the judgment in Amos. Specifically, the Amos vision anticipates the end of the northern kingdom, while Zechariah 2:1-13 promises Jerusalem great things.

In Zechariah 2:2, the prophet asks the man, “Where are you going?” The man answers that he is on his way to measure Jerusalem.

The Structure of Zechariah 2:1-13



Using elements typical of a vision cycle, the structure of this vision may be outlined as follows:

Portrayal of the vision element in 2:1 (MT 2:5)

The prophet’s question in 2:2a (MT 2:6a)

The explanation of the significance of the vision (2:2b-5 [MT 2:6b-9])

Two oracles from YHWH:

A divine command to the exiles to return to Zion (2:6-9 [MT 2:10-13])

A divine command to Lady Zion to rejoice (2:10-12 [MT 2:14-16])

A liturgical command to all people to be silent before YHWH (2:13 [MT 2:17])

The purpose of this measurement is not apparent until the man with the measuring rod is called back from his task. The decision has been made that Jerusalem will not be a walled city because its population will be too large (2:4).

Zechariah 2:3-5 explains the meaning of “the man” with the measuring rod, allowing the reader to listen to a conversation

Angels/Messengers/Men

ΑΩ The term *malaʿk* in Hebrew is a general term for “messenger,” though it is frequently translated as “angel” when the messenger stems from the heavenly realm. These beings have no volition of their own in OT texts, but are commissioned by YHWH to complete specific tasks. These heavenly beings can take the appearance of humans in several Old Testament stories (see, for example Gen 19:1, 5, where the beings are called angels and men). The NRSV translates the term *malaʿk* as messenger or angel depending on the context. When they are humans sent by humans, NRSV uses “messenger(s)” (as in Num 20:14), but it uses “angel(s)” when the beings are sent by YHWH (as in Num 20:16). This human appearance seems to be part of the presumptions of Zechariah’s visions since the beings can be called “men” (Zech 1:8, 10; 2:5) or “messengers” (Zech 1:9, 11-14, 19; 2:3; 3:1, 3, 5-6; 4:1, 4-5; 5:5, 10; 6:4-5). The fact that a few texts refer to heavenly beings as having wings (most notably, the seraphim in Isa 6:2-7) eventually led to the idea that angels have wings, though the Old Testament never mentions a *malaʿk* with wings. Christian artists through the ages have generally portrayed angels with wings, but the perception of what angels look like varies considerably, as a quick search of Google images will confirm.

See Maxwell Davidson, “Angel,” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 1:147–55.

between two angels. [Angels/Messengers/Men]

First, the angel speaking with the prophet goes forth, and another angel comes to meet him. Then one angel tells the other to inform “this young man” not to measure Jerusalem because it would not have walls. Thus, the reader may now safely infer that the person with the measuring line was measuring the perimeter of Jerusalem in order to know how long and wide to make the city walls. Linguistically, it is not clear which angel gave this command, but conceptually it seems more likely that the angel who was speaking with the prophet gave the command to the angel who came out to him. Contextually, the angel who speaks with the prophet appears to have the role of chief among the angels, since the patrols reported to him (1:11) and since he is the one who spoke with YHWH (1:12-14).

What is the rationale behind the angel’s instruction? Apparently, this vision depicts a situation in which a plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was changed. Undoubtedly, a decision not to rebuild the city walls would

have caused concern. In ancient times, city walls protected a city’s inhabitants from numerous predators (human and non-human). The idea of Jerusalem not having a wall would thus be unusual. It explains why 2:5 (MT 2:9) immediately mentions that YHWH himself will be a fire around the city to protect it. Perhaps this vision was intended to help explain why the city’s inhabitants were rebuilding the temple but not rebuilding the ruins of the city walls during the reign of Darius. Historically, it was not until Nehemiah’s time (c. 445 BCE), about seventy-five years later, that the walls of

Jerusalem would be rebuilt. An early attempt to reconstruct the temple had already failed due to resistance from surrounding peoples (Ezra 4), and even during the time of Nehemiah, well after the temple reconstruction, the people faced considerable resistance to rebuilding the wall (Neh 4). This vision could well reflect a political compromise made by leaders to have the temple restored while putting on hold the rebuilding of the walls.¹

At the same time, the defensive metaphor of the fire surrounding Jerusalem is coupled with a dynamic metaphor of YHWH's glory that will be present in the midst of Jerusalem. The glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH refers to the manifestation of God's presence. In the exodus narrative, the awe-inspiring glory of YHWH could be seen by Israel on Sinai (Exod 24:17) and in the wilderness (Num 14:22). As well, it was the glory of YHWH that was periodically visible in the temple (Pss 26:8; 63:2; 102:16). In Ezekiel, it was the glory of YHWH that departed Jerusalem allowing Babylon to enter (Ezek 11:22-23). Like Ezekiel 43:2-4, Zechariah 2 depicts YHWH's restoration of Jerusalem as the return of the glory of YHWH.

Two interrelated oracles follow the vision proper (2:6-9, 10-12). These oracles use first person divine speech and imperatives to offer words of encouragement, but the oracles are directed toward two different entities: the people (2:6-9) and Lady Zion (2:10-12).

The majority of 2:6-9 directly addresses the people in the forms of commands (flee, 2:6) or plural pronouns. This section, along with its counterpart in 2:10-12, needs careful evaluation. It is a call to the exiles to leave Babylon. Given that groups have already left Babylon and that it has already been overthrown, the command to "flee from the land of the north" requires explanation. [Dating the Vision Cycle] The vision is dated to 519 BCE, twenty years after Babylon fell to Persia (539). Yet this command warns those remaining in Babylon to leave while there is still time. Thus, the vision implies that God intends to punish Babylon in a way that puts those living there in danger.

Babylon is specifically mentioned as being among the "nations that plundered you." Two further observations come into play. First, this divine pronouncement builds on the second vision (1:19-21: the punishment of the nations that had furthered the disaster of Jerusalem's destruction), which was in turn related to the first vision thematically. Second, this oracle is tied directly to the

Dating the Vision Cycle



Scholars have long considered the date formulas in Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1 to mirror the style of the superscriptions of Haggai. Nevertheless, scholarship has also considered the material in Zech 1–8 to have been largely compiled near the time of the events described therein. Nevertheless, in scholarly discussions, three passages (3:1-10; 4:6b-10a; 6:9-15) within the vision cycle (Zech 1–8) receive quite a bit of scrutiny because a number of scholars argue that at least portions of these passages appear to have been inserted into their current contexts. Complicating the issue is the fact that those passages contain material that more explicitly refers to the involvement of Joshua and Zerubbabel in rebuilding the temple, which ties them closely to the events of 520–518, the dates included in the superscriptions of Zechariah (1:1, 7; 7:1). Yet this date creates considerable dissonance with Zech 2:6-9, which addresses exiles in Babylon in a way that may suggest Babylon still appears as a political entity that is not yet disadvantaged. However, Babylon was subsumed by Cyrus of Persia around 539 BCE. Thus, 2:6-9 (part of the core visions) anticipates a future punishment of Babylon, but by 520 Persia has controlled the region for nearly two decades. Three avenues of interpretation help to resolve this tension for the reader.

First, as P. Redditt has demonstrated, the core of the visions may have derived from a time before the return to Judah, and could have been originally composed to address a group while still in Babylon. Zech 2:6-9 could originally have addressed Jews in Babylon. Cyrus's takeover of Babylon did not destroy the city. As a result, Jews in Babylon had to face the question of if and when they would return. Many had presumably acclimated to life in Babylon after two generations. The exiles did not return all at once, but came back in groups starting in 538, where they faced difficult economic situations. If 2:6-9 was part of the early core of these visions, it is

understandable how Judah could be portrayed here in more appealing terms.

Second, a strong case has been made that portions of the texts related to Joshua and Zerubbabel were added to the core of the visions, probably to include their publication with Haggai. Since Joshua and Zerubbabel are depicted as in the midst of helping the temple reconstruction, the majority of scholars think these references were inserted near 520, when Joshua and Zerubbabel were still priest and governor respectively. This argument holds true for those who see the reference to Joshua and Zerubbabel in 3:1-10; 4:6b-10a; and 6:9-15 as original to the visions as well as those who see them as later additions.

Third, this final form of the vision cycle was ultimately placed into a context that expects the reader to interpret them as prophetic visions from the time of the temple reconstruction. The compilers creating the superscriptions downplay the dissonance in order to accentuate the role of Joshua and Zerubbabel in restoring the temple.

Compare the works of P. L. Redditt and W. A. M. Beuken on how to interpret the third vision. Redditt sees 2:6-9 as part of the early core addressed to those living in Babylon, while Beuken treats this vision (like the first vision) in the context of the date formulas as a symbolic event designed to contrast the heavenly scene with the current setting in order to provide a salvific promise of what could be. In other words, the symbolic function of the scene does not reflect an earlier time but an ideal toward which one should strive. Whether or not Redditt is correct that an early core of vision material predates the temple construction, his points about the role of Joshua and Zerubbabel being accentuated by those who edited the vision cycle cannot be overlooked.

See Paul L. Redditt, "Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Night Visions of Zechariah," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 249–59; and Willem A. M. Beuken, *Haggai–Sacharja 1–8: Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Frünachexilischen Prophetie* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967) 244–48.

vision of the man with the measuring line (2:1-5), which in turn anticipates a dramatic increase in Jerusalem's population. This connection means the vision report assumes that YHWH's impending punishment on the nations will result in a large influx of YHWH's people returning to Zion.

The reason for the punishment of the nations is their treatment of YHWH's people (2:8). In a clear case of poetic justice, YHWH

promises that those who “plundered” you (2:8) will “become plunder for their own slaves” (2:9). This pronouncement is thematically similar to the pronouncement against the Philistines and Phoenicians in Joel 3:4-8. The shame associated with the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of foreigners is one that would last a long time in the minds of the people (see Deut 28:37; 1 Kgs 9:7; Joel 2:17; Zech 8:13). Thus, for many, restoration involved more than YHWH’s willingness to accept them. It also involved punishment of those who had taken advantage of Judah and Jerusalem during their time of punishment.

A second oracle is addressed directly to Lady Zion (2:10-12; see the treatment of the personification of Lady Zion in [Lady Zion in Micah 1], [Jerusalem Personified] in the introduction to Micah, and Lady Zion’s role in the interpretation of Micah 4:9-12. See also [Cities Personified] in Hos 2). The message calls on Lady Zion to “sing and rejoice” (2:10) because YHWH will return to dwell in her midst. This pronouncement alludes to the temple under construction as the place where YHWH’s presence will reside.

Zechariah 2:11 looks forward to YHWH’s return as a significant turning point when “many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people.” This promise has religious and political implications, but it coincides with contemporary expectations in Haggai (2:7) and elsewhere in Zechariah (8:20-23). It does, however, take those expectations a step further than Haggai by clearly stating that these many nations will join themselves to YHWH. In short, this vision report fully anticipates that YHWH’s presence in Zion will usher in a new age of splendor where Jerusalem will become a major center of the known world. These hopes, however, will be dashed by the end of Zechariah. [Jerusalem as the

Center of the World] Generally thought to be added later, Zechariah 9–14 changes the expectations about Jerusalem’s future status, pushing this glorious vision into the more distant future following a time of battle against the nations (Zech 14). But here in Zechariah 2, optimism is the order of the day—optimism for a

Jerusalem as the Center of the World



Prophetic eschatology in the postexilic period begins to develop the idea that Jerusalem will become the center of God’s eschatological kingdom. One can see this idea as an extension and heightening of the prophetic hopes that Jerusalem’s restoration (Amos 9:11-12; Zeph 3:14-20) will result in the reestablishment of YHWH’s rule in Jerusalem (see Joel 3:17, 21). With YHWH enthroned at the new temple, it is a small step to see the place of the king’s throne as the center of the world. In eschatological portrayals, the significance of Jerusalem increases because it represents the seat of YHWH’s dominion (see Zech 14:8-21; Isa 66:18-24). There develops as well, however, a certain cognitive dissonance since Jerusalem, as a city and the location of a small temple, hardly seemed to live up to these expectations (hence Isa 66:1-2).

Language Associated with Moses and Joshua

AO Thirty-five of the fifty-nine occurrences of the verb “to possess”/“inherit” appear in Exodus through Joshua. The phrase “holy ground” appears only here and in Exod 3:5, the story of Moses at the burning bush. (Compare also the “holy place” in Josh 5:15.) The choosing of Jerusalem is reminiscent of the important text of Deut 12 where Moses predicts YHWH will choose a place in the land for offering sacrifice to him (Deut 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26). This concept is also picked up in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kgs 8 (see especially 8:16, 44).

renewed and restored city, temple, and people that will bring honor to YHWH.

These events, according to 2:12, will mean that YHWH has once again taken possession of Judah and has chosen Jerusalem. Thus, this language of 2:12 is reminiscent of language associated with Moses and Joshua, subtly adding to the impression that the returnees are embarking on a new period of entry into the land after a long period of life in the wilderness.

[Language Associated with Moses and Joshua]

At its end, this third vision report concludes with a command to be silent before YHWH (2:13). Zechariah 2:13 stops the direct address to Lady Zion and returns to the broader perspective of “all flesh.” The speaker also changes since YHWH no longer speaks in the first person. As well, the verse serves as a concluding affirmation

that YHWH’s intention to act should remind all people that they should fear YHWH. Finally, YHWH is portrayed as having left his heavenly dwelling in order to return to Jerusalem (see Deut 26:15; Jer 25:30; Ps 68:5).

The command to “be silent” resonates with other texts in the Book of the Twelve, especially those associated with YHWH and the temple. [“Be Silent” in the Book of the Twelve] There is also an ominous quality to the image in this context. The idea of YHWH rousing himself from his dwelling elicits images of the divine warrior preparing for battle.² In short, YHWH is on the move, and this has varied implications. The prophet’s vision report interprets YHWH’s move as good news for Jerusalem, but it is clearly bad news for the nations that have taken advantage of her.

“Be Silent” in the Book of the Twelve

AO Five of the seven occurrences of this word (Heb. *has*) appear in the Book of the Twelve (Judg 3:19; Amos 6:10; 8:3; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:17; Neh 8:11). All five of these occurrences relate to silence before YHWH. Three of these occurrences (Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:17) concern pronouncements of judgment that will directly affect the temple in a clear progression. In Hab 2:20, YHWH is “in his holy temple.” Zeph 1:7 announces that the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem on the day of YHWH is at hand, with the effect that the temple will also be destroyed. Finally, in Zech 2:17, YHWH has roused himself from his holy dwelling place in order to return to Jerusalem.

CONNECTIONS

Justice is a word that in both English and in Hebrew contains a dual edge. On the one hand, for the oppressed, God’s justice offers hope that the orderliness of creation will somehow be set right. Usually, as in this case, God is the only one considered powerful

enough to change the situation. On the other hand, for those who perpetrate acts contrary to God's desire (i.e., injustice), God's justice involves judgment because the status quo will no longer be tolerated.

From a biblical perspective, the crucial element of justice is the relationship of human behavior to God's expectations. Are we acting in accordance with God's desire or contrary to it? Typically, as individuals, if our behavior is called into question, we will attempt to justify it. However, it takes more commitment, more intentionality, to view our own behavior self-critically.

Corporately, our behavior is similar. Most religious nations tend to act as though national interest is equated with the will of the divine. In these cases, political rhetoric often co-opts theological affirmations in order to rally support, to justify actions, and to give religious meaning to political actions. The problem is that when politicians on both sides claim that God supports their cause, it should give us pause to stop and ask, "Where is God in this picture?"

While this third vision report raises theological questions along these lines, the answers are not easy. Was God really about to inflict Babylon with some disaster as the prophet's vision reports? On the one hand, Zechariah saw God's hand at work in the process that had returned exiles from Babylon to begin the reconstruction of the temple. YHWH would again have a presence in Jerusalem. On the other hand, the circumstances of the return seemed incomplete. Temple reconstruction was underway, but many exiles remained in Babylon and were unwilling, for whatever reason, to return to Zion. Babylonian rule had been replaced, but for many in Jerusalem (the prophet included), the relatively peaceful transition from Babylonian to Persian rule hardly seemed commensurate with the destruction and degradation that they had been forced to endure at the hands of Babylon and others. For them, restoration was incomplete without retribution.

Zechariah's vision reports certainly voice this perspective. First, the vision report of 2:1-13 brings a message of greatness for Jerusalem. It anticipates a city that will soon become like the idealized city of Jerusalem of old. As well, it portrays YHWH as preparing imminent retribution on Babylon and other nations for the way they treated God's people. Yet, from all that we know about Babylon in the sixth century onward, the kind of judgment

Entree d'Alexandre a Babylone

Charles Le Brun. *Entree d'Alexandre a Babylone* (Alexander the Great Enters Babylon) (1665) detail. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

against the city that appears to be anticipated here was not forthcoming. Even as late as the time of Alexander the Great, more than two hundred years after Cyrus peacefully conquered Babylon, the city was still a major metropolitan area. Was Zechariah wrong concerning Babylon's imminent destruction? It would seem so. Why? That remains a mystery. Perhaps Zechariah had been speaking from his own sense of desire for punishment of the Babylonians. Perhaps God changed God's mind (see Jonah). At any rate, failure of prophetic predictions, even among the so-called writing prophets, should make us cautious about equating the will of God with the destruction of national enemies.

NOTES

1. See Michael Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 22; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 364. Floyd notes the lack of a wall would have been considered an issue of some importance. There is no way to know whether this vision reflects a historical situation in which a decision was made not to build a wall at this time. It is not necessary for there to have been an actual plan for the vision to make sense, but the fact that this vision stops the man measuring could also assume there had been plans to construct a wall, but that these plans were put off until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (see Ezra 9:9; Neh 1–6).

2. See the discussion of the divine warrior in Joel 3:10 and Hab 3.

JOSHUA THE HIGH PRIEST

Zechariah 3:1-10

COMMENTARY

The fourth vision deviates significantly from the four-fold pattern in the other vision reports (see the introduction to the night visions in Zech 1). Specifically, this vision report lacks a question from the prophet about the meaning of what he sees (compare 1:9, 19; 2:2; 4:4, 11-12; 5:6; 6:4); consequently there is no explanation of the item seen, and the introductory formula in 3:1 differs from the other formulaic introductions (1:8, 18; 2:1; 4:1-2; 5:1; 5:5; 6:1). For this reason, it has often been suggested that this vision was added later, though recent treatments tend to focus on the connections it does exhibit to the broader vision cycle.

The scene's action is carried by five speeches separated by narrative transitions. **[Five Speeches]** These speeches convey a three-fold movement in which YHWH, the judge, vindicates Joshua by refusing to find him guilty (3:1-2). The angel of YHWH moves quickly to cleanse Joshua (3:3-5) and then conveys an oracle of covenantal affirmation (3:6-10).

Zechariah 3:1-2. The prophet sees three entities whom he apparently recognizes without being told: the high priest Joshua (cf. Hag 1:1), the angel of YHWH standing beside Joshua; and the satan standing beside Joshua's right hand to accuse him. The image evokes a trial scene with YHWH as judge and "the satan" as the prosecuting attorney. The term often translated as "Satan" (*haśśātān*) is more literally translated

Five Speeches



Narrator: Description of the scene (3:1)

Speech #1—YHWH: Refusal of the charge from the *śātān* (3:2)

Narrator: Description of Joshua (3:3)

Speech #2—Angel: Commands those standing to cleanse Joshua (3:4a)

Narrator: Descriptive change of address: to Joshua (3:4bα*)

Speech #3—Angel: Explanation of actions (3:4bα*β)

Narrator: Formulaic change of speaker (3:5a*)

Speech #4—Prophet: Command to put on his turban (3:5a*)

Narrator: Report of the turban's placement and assurance (3:5b-6)

Speech #5—Angel: Oracle (3:7-10; formally conveyed by the angel, but introduced with a messenger formula, so that the "I" in the speech is YHWH)

“The Satan”

AS The Satan in Zechariah is a figure who requires some explanation. Most church people visualize Satan of the New Testament, if not some hideous beast with horns. The concept of Satan as the ruler of the netherworld, however, had not yet entered into the cosmological world of the Old Testament. The Satan of later Old Testament texts plays the role of heavenly accuser or a kind of heavenly prosecuting attorney. There is not yet a clear sense of Satan as the adversary of YHWH in Zechariah. A glance at the English translations of the Hebrew word “*śāṭān*” is instructive. The English word “Satan” appears eighteen times in the Old Testament of both the NRSV and the RSV. By contrast, the Hebrew word *śāṭān* appears twenty-six times. The difference comes about because the Hebrew word literally means “adversary” and is used of human adversaries six times (1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kgs 5:18; 1 Kgs 11:14; 1 Kgs 11:23; 1 Kgs 11:25). It is also used twice in the Balaam stories to refer to the angel of YHWH who is acting as an adversary to Balaam, not God (Num 22:22, 32).

A clue that the idea of Satan as a heavenly figure likely developed later in Israel’s history can be seen in the parallel texts of 2 Sam 24:1 and 1 Chr 21:1. The earlier of the two texts, 2 Sam 24:1, states that YHWH incited David, out of anger, to take the census for which they would be punished. The later text, 1 Chr 21:1, attributes the motivation for the census to Satan. Two different theologies about the origination of wicked actions lie behind these two texts. For a fuller discussion of the issues, see Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: śāṭān in the Hebrew Bible* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).



Dante Alighieri. Virgil shows Dante the inferno, 14th C. From *The Divine Comedy*. (Credit: HIP/Art Resource, NY)

as “the satan,” which means “the accuser.” [**“The Satan”**] Thus, the reader must assume that Joshua is the one on trial, even though the charge is not stated. Joshua, the great priest or chief priest, has already been introduced to the reader of the Book of the Twelve in Haggai’s speeches, but this is the first time Joshua appears in Zechariah (see discussion of Hag 1:1).

Zechariah 3:2 begins with the verdict rather than an extensive review of the trial. According to the angel, YHWH rebukes the adversary who has brought the case before him. In other words, YHWH vindicates Joshua by dismissing the charges. Even at this point, the text does not specify the nature of the charges against Joshua. As well, the reason for rejecting the adversary’s case must be deduced from the context. When YHWH says, “Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?” several factors illuminate the interpretation. First, the phrase implies that Joshua has been delivered from some catastrophe involving fire (though this image may be metaphorical). Second, it explains why Joshua needs clean clothes

(see 3:3-4). Various reasons have been suggested regarding why the garments are singed, and all involve speculation. It has been suggested from rabbinic times that Joshua's clothes were dirty from soot in a fire. Some rabbinic traditions name Joshua as one of the three men in the furnace with Daniel. More recently, some scholars speculate his clothes were singed because he stood too close to the false prophets. Others suggest that Joshua had to atone for his sin or the sin of his sons who had married foreign women. Still others see the fire metaphorically as a reference to Joshua as a young man having escaped the slaughter of the priests of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. While the reason why Joshua's clothes are singed remains ambiguous, the image of "plucking from the fire" is essentially positive, for it is the image of one who has been delivered at the last minute.

Zechariah 3:3-5. Zechariah 3:3 depicts Joshua standing before YHWH's messenger in filthy garments. This situation implies that Joshua has been delivered from a dangerous situation at the last moment, but the delivery leaves him impure. The filthy garments are then replaced with "festal apparel." The Hebrew root behind this word suggests that the new garments were white.

After the angel speaks to a group in 3:4, presumably other angels in the heavenly court, the angel addresses Joshua directly, explaining that he has replaced Joshua's garments in order to "remove your guilt from you." [Heavenly Court] "Guilt" implies that which alienates Joshua from God or that which prevents him from performing his role as chief priest.

In 3:5, the prophet speaks, injecting a request to a group that they put a clean turban on Joshua's head. The word for "turban" (*ṣanîp*) is actually a generic term for "head band," used elsewhere to refer to the headgear of men (Job 29:14), women (Isa 3:23), and royalty (Isa 62:3). Other texts use a more technical term (*miṣnepet*) when referring to a priest's turban (Exod 29:6; Lev 8:9), though both words come from the same root. Thus, one cannot claim that this scene refers exclusively to priestly garments based solely on references to the turban. Still, the point appears implicit since Joshua was already introduced as chief

Heavenly Court



The visionary character of this text presumes a setting of the heavenly court. The ancient Near East often viewed the heavenly court as a royal scene where the chief god presided over the pantheon of deities. In the Old Testament, YHWH takes the role of the chief god and angels play the part of the other deities, but angels only play the role of messenger gods. They perform tasks at the command of the king, YHWH, who reigns from his throne. See discussions in Lowell K. Handy, "The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (ed. Diana Vikander Edelman; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 27–43; Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: šāṭān in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 1–15, 118–26.

priest (3:1) and since subsequent verses appear to presume a group of priests is also present (see 3:8, 9). Finally, with the angel of YHWH watching, the angels do as instructed by the prophet.

Zechariah 3:6-10. Zechariah 3:6 transitions from a description of Joshua's cleansing to an oracle of covenantal affirmation (3:7-10). The speech proper begins in typical prophetic fashion with a messenger formula ("Thus says the LORD of hosts"). It then formulates a covenantal blessing using a series of four conditional clauses. These clauses are spoken to Joshua, and they climax with a promise from YHWH that he will grant Joshua access to the heavenly court. These four conditions also display a certain progression that moves from personal responsibility ("If you walk in my ways and if you keep my requirements") to corporate duties ("and moreover, if you judge my house and keep my courts"). This combination implies that the priest's personal integrity serves as a prerequisite for accomplishing his corporate actions, the proper conducting of which allows continued access to the courts of the LORD. Moreover, this presence in turn completes a cycle: presence in YHWH's court allows Joshua direction and guidance from YHWH, which in turn strengthens Joshua's ability to meet the conditions expected of him.

The promise then takes a different direction in 3:8, where Joshua is addressed directly. The speaker refers to Joshua's friends seated before him. Rather than speaking to the heavenly host as in the previous commands, he speaks of the "colleagues," who are other priests gathered around the high priest. This group constitutes "men of a sign" ("a sign of things to come," NRSV), meaning that they will witness a sign. The sign itself is announced in 3:8b, "for behold I am about to bring my servant the branch (*šemaḥ*)."¹ This pronouncement of the impending arrival creates difficulty in identifying the branch. Two possible interpretations have been suggested. First, a majority of scholars see the branch as a reference to the expected restoration of a descendant of David to the throne. Zerubbabel (4:7, 10) is thus the obvious prospect following this line of thought. This interpretation draws on the promises in Isaiah (11:1, though using a different Hebrew word) and Jeremiah (23:5) for the return of a Davidic king. As a secondary option, a smaller number of scholars suggest that the branch refers to Joshua, thus laying the groundwork for a new dynasty of priestly leadership rather than royal bloodlines. The evidence for this line of thought

appears later in the visions of Zechariah, where 6:11-12 (at least in the current form of the text) names Joshua the branch. Recent discussions, however, see 3:8 as a deliberate attempt to counter the preceding verse that provides power to Joshua by making a place for Zerubbabel as well.

In Zechariah 3:9, YHWH speaks of placing a stone before Joshua that has seven facets and an inscription. This stone probably refers to the “rosette” described in Exodus 28:36-38. This stone would have been placed on the chief priest’s turban, and the inscription on the stone would likely have been similar to that mentioned in Exodus 28:36 and Zechariah 14:20: “holy to YHWH.” The seven facets have been explained in at least two ways: as points for placing Hebrew letters spelling out “holy one of YHWH” (David L. Petersen) or as points of reflection for the seven candles of the temple lampstand described in the subsequent vision (Marvin A. Sweeney).¹ Regardless, at this point the visions exhibit optimism for the high priest, but this positive attitude toward the religious leadership will change by the end of Zechariah. [Attitude toward

Religious Leaders] For now though, the priest’s purification will lead to removal of guilt from the land according to the end of this verse. The wickedness of the land will be the subject of subsequent visions.

The promise of the removal of guilt from the land in 3:9 leads to a more concrete blessing of peace and fertility: neighbors inviting each other to come together “under [their] vine and fig tree.” As a theme, the guilt of the land has played a role in the Book of the Twelve from Hosea onward, but this promise more clearly echoes another promise in Micah 4:4: sitting under one’s own vines and fig trees. Both texts anticipate the fertility of the land, where the grape vines and the olive trees will provide shade from the sun and where landowners can live in security and invite their neighbors to sit peacefully. Both texts offer promises that reverse judgments of the curse on Israel anticipated in Deuteronomy 28:39: “You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them.”

Attitude toward Religious Leaders



The inscription in 3:9 takes a positive attitude toward the chief priest, but by the end of Zechariah, the religious leadership will be seen in a much less optimistic light. Zech 11, 13, and 14 will anticipate judgment on Jerusalem that will sanctify the entire city, for the leadership had failed the people. The result of this refining judgment will be that everything in Jerusalem will become holy: “And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘Holy to the LORD.’ And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar” (Zech 14:20).

CONNECTIONS

The theological movement in 3:1-10 portrays a God unwilling to give up on individuals, a God desiring to forgive, and a God with a purpose for all. As the scene opens, Joshua has been charged with being unacceptable for service. The text does not specify what Joshua had done; it only presumes that his status made him ritually impure. God, however, looks beyond Joshua's soiled garments to see a person who will not only serve God but who will function as chief priest for the restored temple cult. Such action by God is part of a consistent pattern in biblical texts that demonstrates God's frequent choice of people who are seemingly the least "qualified" to perform tasks that God needs done. Moses, for instance, stuttered so badly he would not go to the Israelites without Aaron to speak for him, yet in the end Moses speaks for God to the people. Rahab was a prostitute whose decisive action saved Israel's spies from capture. Gideon was the seventh son of a seventh son who led pivotal battles for the Israelites. David was the youngest son in his family, but was chosen to lead God's people. In the New Testament, this image returns in many ways. Jesus is born in the humble surrounding of a manger, hardly the "appropriate" place for a king. The loaves and fish of a little boy feed a throng of 5,000. Zacchaeus, despised as a tax collector, becomes a character in a memorable story of a life-changing experience with God. Knowing this pattern, Jesus commands his followers to believe that God is present "in the least of these my brothers." In the end, God sees the hearts of people and is not dissuaded by their situation.

God forgives. At the beginning of this passage, Joshua is not ready to function as God's representative. He must be cleansed of his iniquity (or guilt). This iniquity prohibits him from appearing before YHWH as chief priest. Consequently, God commands that Joshua's garments be replaced with clean, festal garments, and God removes Joshua's guilt. Joshua's transformation to one who is ritually cleansed to be chief priest also coincides with patterns of God's radical transformation of persons in both Testaments. From Abraham to Paul and beyond, ordinary people are forgiven of dreadful acts when they encounter the presence of God.

God commissions Joshua to lead the priests while the temple is rebuilt. The one who was impure is given access to the presence of God. The one brought before YHWH as a convict will preside over the priests and the people because God has changed him. This

vision of the prophet presages the radical transformation enabled by an encounter with the biblical God.

This image of God, so prevalent in both Testaments, can easily be lost in modern communities of faith. Recent decades have seen many Christian congregations become involved in hot political debates. As a consequence, political rhetoric from the pulpit has often led pastors of some churches to pontificate about who does or does not belong to God's kingdom. Such actions confuse the role of the church in society with political movements. Just as Joshua met resistance from religious leaders for not meeting their image of purity, and just as Jesus failed the tests of the Pharisees who sought to constrict him to their interpretation of traditions, preachers should not throw stones from the pulpit. Castigating groups of people because they behave differently than we think they should represents theological hubris that usually results in damage to the kingdom of God and ignores the image of grace in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus' ministry reached out to prostitutes and army officers, to religious leaders and beggars, to tax collectors and fishermen, to the crippled and the healthy. Jesus did not say condemn your neighbor as you think they should be condemned. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor.

NOTE

1. See David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 211; Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2000) 2.603.

ZERUBBABEL, THE LAMPSTAND, AND THE OLIVE TREES

Zechariah 4:1-14

COMMENTARY

The fifth vision report in 4:1-14 contains all the expected structural elements present in most of the night visions (see the introduction to the night visions in Zechariah 1), though each element appears at least twice. The portrayal of the image depicts two elements: an extended description of a lampstand (4:2) and two olive trees (4:3). The prophet also asks about the meaning of the elements three times (4:4, 11, 12), and the passage contains two oracular introductions, both of which concern Zerubbabel (4:6-7, 8-10). This oracular material, however, is both out of place with respect to the typical order *and* does not appear to be directly related to the images in the vision proper. Rhetorically, the repetition and unusual order of these elements provides this report with a sense of prominence.

As in most of the other vision reports, the narrative movement of the vision report flows from the description of the images (4:1-3) to the interpretation of the images (4:4-5 + 10b-14). [Narrative Movement of the Vision Report] This fifth vision report, however, makes the reader wait for the interpretation by inserting two oracles concerning Zerubbabel (4:6-7, 8-10a), one from the messenger figure to Zerubbabel (“He said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel’”) and one from YHWH to the prophet (“The word of the LORD came to me”). Only then are the elements of the vision proper interpreted (4:10b-14).

Narrative Movement of the Vision Report



The unusual structure of this vision report stands out when one notes that the oracular material interrupts the description and interpretation of the vision elements.

4:1-6a: Report of the Vision and First Question of Its Meaning

4:6b-10a: Two Parenthetical Oracles Concerning Zerubbabel

4:10b-14: Interpretation of the Lamps and the Two Olive Trees

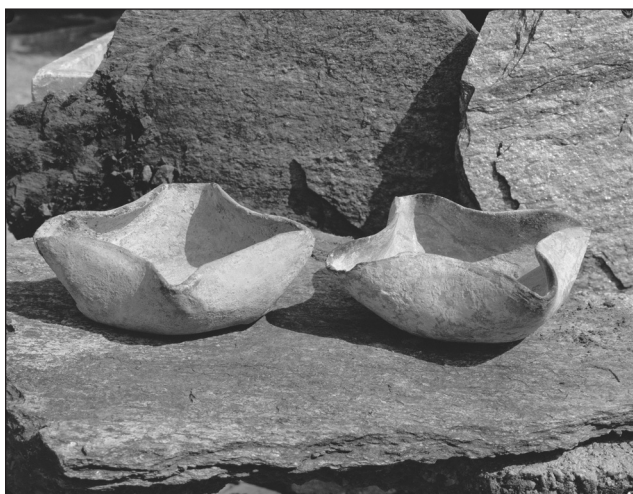
Zechariah 4:1-3. The prophetic vision report describes the return of the heavenly messenger in a manner that implies some time had elapsed since the last vision. Specifically, this report describes an angel waking the prophet the way one wakes someone who is sleeping. The description thus seems to presume something like a prophetic trance, where the prophet is not asleep but might as well be. The messenger asks the prophet what he sees and the prophet

Lampstand



Many interpreters have often envisioned a menorah when describing this vision because of the seven parts of the lamp.

However, the image of Zechariah describes a bowl on the top with seven lamps (or wicks) on it. The actual image, then, is probably closer to a reservoir for the fuel with seven “lamps” where each has seven pinched sections for holding wicks that reach into the fuel reservoir. A similar lamp with four pinched sections is depicted here. A drawing of a lamp found at Dothan with seven pinched sections can be seen in David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 220.



Two oil lamps from Jerusalem. Terracotta (around 2100 BCE). Private Collection (T.E.L.). (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

replies with an extensive description of a lampstand and two olive trees. (Parts of each of these elements will be interpreted later [4:10b-13, 14].)

The details of the lampstand described in 4:2 are complicated by the syntax, but they appear to describe an ornate lampstand where forty-nine lighted wicks are fed by a bowl of olive oil, which is in turn supplied by two pipes leading to two olive trees. [Lampstand] The large number of lit sections would make this light particularly impressive, and the connection of the pipes directly to the olive trees implies that the light is constant.

Zechariah 4:4-6aa, 6b-10a, 10ab-14. These verses report a conversation that introduces the interpretation of the elements for Zechariah. Functionally, the verses now serve as the first

part of the framing device for two oracles concerning Zerubbabel (4:6ab-7, 8-10a). Then, 4:10b-14, the concluding part of the frame, interprets the vision elements that began in 4:4-6aa.

In 4:4, the prophet asks the angel to tell him what these things mean as he has done before (1:9; 2:2). The angel's introduction of the interpretation, however, surprises the reader because it offers no immediate connection to the previously described elements.¹ This editorial technique deliberately creates tension for the reader, but it

likely derives from the fact that Zerubbabel has not yet appeared in Zechariah. His identity, however, is presumed in 4:14.

The first oracle (4:6a β -7) begins with an introductory formula designating the oracle as YHWH's word to Zerubbabel (4:6a β). The introduction is followed by an affirmation that what happens will come, "not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of Hosts." This motto inserts a sense of unease into the context, for it implies tension between someone wanting to do something by human power and YHWH stating that anything that happens will come from YHWH, not from human strength. Zerubbabel is the governor of Judah who is a descendant of Davidic kings (see discussion of Hag 1:1). What is not immediately clear is whether this line suggests that Zerubbabel wanted to use human power for some purpose or whether the message is offered as comfort to Zerubbabel. The second part of the oracle (4:7), however, clarifies that it is not directed against Zerubbabel since it portrays him in positive terms. Specifically, it portrays Zerubbabel as the one who will level "the great mountain." The mountain has been interpreted in both physical and figurative terms, as a reference to the rebuilding of the rubble of the temple area. Thus, the image of Zerubbabel carrying the top stone while people shout "grace, grace" likely draws on a temple cleansing ceremony.² This image of Zerubbabel and the temple construction also corresponds with the second oracle.

The second oracle (4:8-10a) affirms to the prophet that Zerubbabel will complete the rebuilding of the temple. The *prophet* is told that the work, which Zerubbabel began by laying the foundation, will be completed by Zerubbabel himself, and that this completion will be a sign to know the LORD had sent the prophet to Zerubbabel: "so that you will know that the LORD of Hosts has sent me to you." This verification formula of the sending of the prophet appears four times in the vision cycle (2:9, 11; 4:9; 6:15), but the addressee changes. The first and last address the people using second masculine plural suffixes. Zechariah 2:11 addresses Lady Zion (second feminine singular), and 4:9 addresses Zerubbabel (second masculine singular). Alternating addressees in this verification formula does several things. First, its repetition to the people, Lady Zion, and Zerubbabel, undergirds the image of the prophet's authority. Second, its use in 4:9 suggests that in its original setting the oracle was delivered by the prophet to

Zerubbabel, not as part of the vision cycle. This setting furthers the impression that this oracular material has been added to the existing vision report to serve a particular purpose—that is, to introduce Zerubbabel into the context before the interpretation of the olive trees. In short, it serves the dual function of validating both the prophet's veracity and the work of Zerubbabel on the temple. The need for undergirding the work of Zerubbabel becomes clear with 4:10.

Zechariah 4:10a presupposes that Zerubbabel met some measure of resistance in his efforts to rebuild the temple, specifically from those who saw that the results would be inglorious when compared to the glory of the former temple. Ezra 3:10-13 reports that the laying of the temple foundation elicited great joy from many and great lamentation from others, for the latter could remember the glory of the previous temple. However, the Ezra account likely refers more to the *reputation* of the glory of the previous temple than to people who had actually seen the previous temple. The Jerusalem temple had been destroyed sixty-seven years earlier, and only the oldest members of the community would have been able to recall actually seeing it. Undoubtedly, Ezra 3:10-13 implies that the foundation of the new temple was clearly not the size of the temple that had been destroyed. Moreover, the new temple may have seemed inadequate to some who would have preferred to wait for the resources to rebuild a temple comparable in size. Zerubbabel had apparently received permission and funding to begin the process and had decided to begin the rebuilding project instigated by Haggai some months earlier (see discussion of Zerubbabel in Haggai). In fact, Zechariah 4:10 seems to reflect the same perspectives as those addressed in Haggai 2:2-5, where the stature (if not also the size) of the temple project also raised concerns. Zechariah 4:10a adds to the support offered to Zerubbabel for undertaking the reconstruction, even in the face of internal resistance. Contextually, the reader of the vision report has now been introduced to Zerubbabel, a necessity for understanding the interpretation of 4:14, which associates the two anointed ones with the two olive trees in 4:12 and relates back to the elements of the vision in 4:1-7.

Following the presentation of the two oracles concerning Zerubbabel, Zechariah 4:10b answers the question about how to interpret the vision elements introduced in 4:4-5. Zechariah 4:10b

jolts the reader back to the vision: “These seven are the eyes of the LORD which range through the whole earth.” This explanation obviously refers to the lampstand, but it presumes knowledge concerning the function of the “eyes of the king” and the “eyes of YHWH.” The “eyes of YHWH” are not physical descriptions of a deity with seven orbs in its head. [The Eyes of YHWH] Rather, the eyes symbolize YHWH’s prescience, in this case of the welfare of Judah and Jerusalem. In Zechariah’s vision reports, they probably presume a royal practice of maintaining a kind of secret service through the use of informants who report to the king.

The explanation from the angel equating the lamps with the eyes of YHWH elicits no further response from the prophet, but in 4:12 the prophet asks about the two items on either side: “What are these two branches of the olive trees?” The remainder of 4:12 is difficult to translate and often emended, but the description clearly implies that the olive branches are somehow providing fuel (oil) for the lamp. The olive tree often represents the fertility of the land, though here it symbolizes two individuals who fuel the lamp. [The Olive Tree] Nevertheless, its assumption that olive trees symbolize fertility can be noted in the background.

The angel responds in 4:13 in a manner that seems to imply a sense of disappointment with the prophet. The angel queries the prophet, “You mean you do not know?” When the prophet affirms he really does not understand, the angel tells the prophet that they represent the two “sons of (olive) oil standing beside the Lord of all the earth.” Given the previous vision report that had introduced Joshua and the current report with its inserted oracles concerning

The Eyes of YHWH

Ω The concept of YHWH’s eyes appears in other Old Testament texts: Jer 24:6; 32:19; Ezek 5:11; 7:4, 9; 8:18; 9:10; 20:17; Prov 15:3; Ps 66:7; and Job 34:21. Within the Book of the Twelve, this concept appears three times: Amos 9:8; Zech 4:10; Mal 2:17. In these texts, Amos 9:8 and Mal 2:17 use the phrase in a way that refers to God’s attention. Zech 4:10, however, seems to have something else in mind. The phrase can bring comfort or fear. Amos 9:8 has the eyes of YHWH turned against the kingdom of Israel for ill, while Zech 4:10 assumes the eyes are watching out for the restored community. By contrast, Mal 2:17 uses the phrase negatively by confronting the people of the postexilic community who were willing to overlook behavior displeasing to YHWH. The idea is often presumed when speaking of YHWH looking down on humanity as in Pss 14:2; 113:5-6. For this reason, Petersen is surely correct in dismissing the “astral interpretation” that sees the seven eyes as seven planets, an interpretation found in Philo, Josephus, and other early interpreters. Thus, Zech 4:10 seems to refer to specific entities as the “eyes” of YHWH. This perspective sets this text apart from most uses of the phrase.

Evidence exists that kings of the Persian period and beyond were known to hire “eyes” and “ears” as part of the royal apparatus whose task was to report anything of interest to the king. This practice may lie behind the idea of beings who patrol the earth for God, especially as found in this context and the first and last vision reports in Zechariah. The function of the messengers on patrol in the first and eighth vision appears to be to report to YHWH what they learn in a manner similar to the eyes and ears of the king. For more complete discussion and listing of this evidence, see A. Oppenheim, “The Eyes of the Lord,” *JAOS* 88 (1968): 173–80; and David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 225–29.

The Olive Tree



The olive tree functions as a symbol of agricultural fertility in Old Testament texts, but such is particularly true in the Book of the Twelve (Hos 14:6 [14:7 MT]; Amos 4:9; Mic 6:15; Hab 3:17; Hag 2:19; Zech 4:3, 11-12; 14:4). The reasons for this function are, in part, obvious from daily life. The olive tree is a prolific tree that produces multi-functional fruit. The olive fruit can be eaten and used in preparation of succulent dishes, but it also serves as a major source of oil for cooking and for lighting lamps. This latter purpose serves as the backdrop for the role the olive trees play in this vision description. However, in the string of texts in which it occurs, there appears to be a recurring motif of olive tree promises—a motif that is probably part of the unifying editorial activity of the Book of the Twelve (see discussion of Hos 14:6; Amos 4:9; Mic 6:15; Hab 3:17; Hag 2:19).

Zerubbabel, there is little doubt that the identities of these two “sons of oil” were understood (at least by the editors) to be Joshua and Zebubabbel, the religious leader and the political leader of the restored community. No further information is given regarding their function, but the report provides a powerful message of support from God for these two individuals who are in large part credited with finally getting the reconstruction of the temple underway.

CONNECTIONS

Several points stand out when interpreting this passage. First, the fundamental impression given by the vision proper is that YHWH sanctions the temple reconstruction. Metaphorically, the lamp provides the light by which the eyes of YHWH will work to protect the realm of the king. Thus, the temple’s reconstruction is presented as something that has implications for the entire world (4:10b). Second, the vision’s interpretation also signals YHWH’s acceptance of the role of two leaders in helping rebuild the temple. Even though only Zerubbabel is mentioned by name in the inserted material, the core vision references “two anointed ones” (4:14). That acknowledgment appears to have been part of the vision from the beginning. Consequently, the insertion of the oracular material in 4:6-10a (as is likely with the unusually structured vision in 3:1-10 that focused on Joshua) appears to have been included for two reasons: to introduce the reader of Zechariah to Zerubbabel, one of those leaders who had not as yet appeared in the book, and to underscore God’s intention that Zerubbabel complete the project he had begun.

While it is tempting to speculate on the details that may have caused the need for the prophet to announce YHWH’s support, the more pressing question here is the hermeneutical one. What enduring value does a pronouncement such as this vision report have? In one respect, one can make the case that this vision report, with its quaint but odd images, concerns events and persons long since gone from the scene. And to a large extent such is the case.

However, this report points to another aspect of Scripture that we sometimes overlook. Specifically, Scripture often functions as a testimony for reflection, not a mandate for emulation. This peculiar report points to a specific instance when a prophet voiced a powerful word: God is doing something of significance in our midst. This vision report has far less to do with prediction than with proclamation that God is at work.

Too often we dilute the past to a laundry list of events that transpired without ever stopping to think how they happened. Haggai and Zechariah are typically depicted as prophets whose preaching actually seems to have had the desired effect on the people, on the religious establishment, and on the political powers. They preached; the temple was reconstructed. And yet, whether one looks at these events as described in Ezra, in Haggai, or in Zechariah, it is clear that behind the scenes there were those who did not want these events to happen. Effecting change is seldom easy. At the time of Zechariah, the temple ruins had stood for sixty-seven years as testimony to God's *dissatisfaction* with a people. By that time, religious services had developed for celebrating the devastation (see discussion of Zech 7–8). Suddenly, along comes a prophet who challenges the people and their leaders to change the way they relate to God. In short, the speeches of Haggai and the vision reports of Zechariah testify that God had initiated a change.

It is probably no coincidence that Zechariah and Haggai, each in his own way, enlisted the help of powerful allies in the persons of Joshua and Zerubbabel. Yet the vision report puts this collaboration in another perspective. These people are portrayed as being chosen by God to carry out these tasks. According to Zechariah, Zerubbabel did not decide to rebuild the temple; God chose him to do so. In the previous vision, Joshua was unfit to serve as priest until God took the initiative to cleanse him. Together, in some amazing way, God worked through people who were open to being used in a particular time and place to accomplish something new. In this vision report and the accompanying oracle, Zechariah tells the people that God has sanctioned the work of Joshua and Zerubbabel and that Zerubbabel would see the project to completion.

In so doing, something unusual happened, something bigger than just erecting a building. Was the second temple grander than the first? Not physically. It was likely smaller at first and was cer-

Second Temple



The second temple lasted from the time of its construction (520–515 BCE) until the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE, but it developed over time. The largest expansion of the temple came under Herod near the end of the first century BCE. The remains of its western wall can be seen today, but these ruins have been the site of religious pilgrimage from that time forward.

Gustav Bauernfeind (1848–1904). *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem*. Oil on canvas. Private collection. (Credit: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/08/Wailing_Wall_by_Gustav_Bauernfeind.png)

tainly less elaborate than the way people remembered the previous temple, which had undoubtedly been idealized after its destruction. Was the second temple grander than the first? It certainly was symbolically. It represented a new beginning. A new structure arose from the rubble of past failures. The vision reports testify to the process by which a prophet communicated God's removal of punishment (vision 1), God's command to return favor to Jerusalem (vision 2), and God's selection and purification of new religious (vision 3) and political (vision 4) leadership. One can see a progression toward restoration depicted in these visions, and the progression continues.

This testimony offers hope for communities of faith today. If God has restored what was so badly broken in the past, God can restore things in our lives, in our relationships, and in our communities in our time. That is the purpose of this testimony: to offer a word of hope that the eyes of God are looking for ways to bring about goodness. In the aftermath of devastation, it can seem difficult to believe that good things can happen again. The Bible,

however, depicts God's motivations for humanity as those of good news. Jeremiah anticipates the devastation of Jerusalem but speaks powerfully of God's desire for the welfare of humanity:

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. (Jer 49:10-12)

This perspective, in both literary and theological terms, represents a significant part of what drives the visions of Zechariah and that should embolden the imagination of believers today. What is the good that God is doing in our lives, in the community of believers in which we participate, and in humanity in general? It is easy to look at the world and see darkness. It takes a vision from God to imagine moving beyond self-interest to rebuild the ruins, whether those ruins are personal or corporate.

NOTES

1. For a different understanding of how the oracles came to be in this vision report, see Bart B. Bruehler, "Seeing through the `YNYM of Zechariah: Understanding Zechariah 4," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 430–43. Bruehler sees only the second oracle as a later addition. While his arguments concerning the original inclusion of the first oracle remain debatable, Bruehler nevertheless solidifies the arguments for the relationship of these two oracles with the beginning and end of the temple reconstruction process.

2. Antti Laato, "Zechariah 4,6b-10a and the Akkadian Royal Building Inscriptions," *ZAW* 106 (1994): 53–69.

A FLYING SCROLL

Zechariah 5:1-4

COMMENTARY

The sixth vision report in the series appears in 5:1-4 with the vision of the flying scroll. It exhibits three of the four elements common to the vision reports of Zechariah (see the introduction to the night visions in Zechariah 1). The image is described in 5:1-2; an unsolicited explanation is given to the prophet by the angel in 5:3; and 5:4 marks the oracular material by the *neʾum YHWH* (utterance of YHWH) formula. This oracle describes the effect of the scroll's going forth. The patterned element not present is the question from the prophet to the angel asking for an explanation. The angel provides an explanation of the vision without the prophet requesting it (5:3). This missing element might imply that the angel assumes that if the prophet had not understood the earlier oracles, then this one would not make sense given that it deals with a huge flying scroll.¹

In Zechariah 5:1-2, the prophet's description reminds the reader that this vision report is part of a series of reports. Clues include its beginning word (translated in NRSV as "again I"), its use of the recurring phrase for lifting of the eyes (1:18; 2:1; 5:5, 9; 6:1), and the assumption that the reader will recognize the angel who speaks in 5:2.

In 5:1, the prophet is not told to look up, but when he does, he sees something highly unusual: a flying scroll. Without introduction (cf. 1:9, 14, 19; 2:3; 4:1; 5:5; 6:4; see also 3:4), the angel then immediately asks the prophet what he sees in 5:2. In response, the prophet repeats himself but adds a more detailed description by giving dimensions of the scroll: "I see a flying scroll that is thirty feet long and fifteen feet high." [\[Dimensions of the Scroll\]](#) This vision contains not one but two highly unusual elements: the scroll is flying and it is huge.

The explanation of the meaning of this vision in 5:3 equates the scroll with "the curse going forth." In order to understand the signif-

Dimensions of the Scroll



The dimensions of the scroll are given in cubits (20 cubits x 10 cubits). A cubit measures from the elbow to the fingertip, meaning it is approximately 18 inches long. The dimensions of this scroll are thus around 30 feet by 15 feet. These proportions are strange. The length is not overly large, but the flying scroll is tall. Most scrolls found at Qumran, for example,

are 11 inches tall or less, not 15 feet. Thus, it is usually assumed that in some way these dimensions allude to the temple, especially since the dimensions of the scroll correspond exactly to those of the temple porch (1 Kgs 6:3). It remains unclear how this allusion affects the meaning, except that several of the visions employ temple imagery.

icance of this figurative statement, one needs to understand three types of curses in the Old Testament: the aggressive audible curse, the trial curse, and the treaty curse. [Types of Curses] Of these three distinctions, Zechariah 5:3 corresponds most closely to the first type, where a spoken curse takes on a life of its own in searching out the guilty party/parties and punishing them for particular

Types of Curses



D. L. Petersen discusses three distinct types of curses illustrated with texts from Jdg 17:2; Num 5:21-28; and Gen 26:28. First, Jdg 17:2 calls for an unknown person who has committed a crime to be cursed. In that context, a woman curses whoever stole her money, not knowing it was her son. She then removes the curse by pronouncing a blessing when her son (who knows about the curse) confesses to keep the curse from taking his life. The assumption is that the curse was activated by her pronunciation of it. Second, Num 5:21-28 describes an accusation against a known person where the accusation cannot be proven. In this case, the curse becomes the arbiter of guilt or innocence when it is spoken by the accused. The accused must ingest a potion to determine the fate of that person. Third, Gen 26:28 along with other texts (e.g., Ezek 17:3; Deut 28) belongs to a class of treaty curses. These curses call for punishment if one covenant partner disregards the agreed-on treaty stipulations. The articulated punishments often call for a destruction of the house of the one breaking the covenant. Zech 5 presumes the first type of curse because the curse is made public (by a visible flying scroll) and takes on the role of finding the guilty party. J. Scharbert sees the first category as a curse used to protect property; as well, he sees its home in the legal sphere as an “audible curse” that implies only an immediate confession can avert disaster for the guilty party. He also cites Lev 5:1 and Prov 29:24 as examples, and he notes that the curse must be made public for it to take effect.

See David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 247–48; Josef Scharbert, “*ālāh*,” *TDOT* 1:262.

reasons. This verse also lays out the accusation that, despite some difficult translation issues, anticipates the curse searching out those who commit two crimes that feature prominently in the ethical portion of the Decalogue: stealing and swearing falsely.

[Translating Zechariah 5:3]

The implication of this vision and its accusations is illustrated more explicitly in 5:4. The scroll will find those who merit punishment for their behavior (thieves and those who swear false oaths). The curse will then bring death upon the entire household of those people. In so doing, this verse suggests a penalty that is quite harsh, even by Old Testament legal standards. In most instances, the penalty for thievery involved punitive monetary restitution. For example, in Exodus 22:1-3, a thief must pay four to five times the value of an animal that is stolen. The sentence for one who swears falsely varies with the crime, with the penalty being the same for the false accuser as the crime he asserts has been committed. The punishment of Zechariah’s vision implies the severity of the crimes in YHWH’s eyes. Moreover, the extent of the

Translating Zechariah 5:3



The description in 5:3 involves translation difficulties, though a consensus exists that 5:3 in some way functions as an accusation because of 5:4. Several options emerge for translating *nāqâ* (acquit/empty out) and the phrase “from this according to it.” The NRSV translates *nāqâ* (acquit) as “cut off,” even though elsewhere the verb never has this sense. The NRSV also takes the phrase “from this according to it” (repeated twice) to refer to one side of the scroll and then the other. M. A. Sweeney, on the other hand, argues for the normal meaning of “to be exempt” for *nāqâ*. He sees 5:3 as a description of a situation in which the societal order has broken down. He understands two different antecedents: “from this (crime) according to it (the curse/scroll)” the thief/liar is exempt. Then, the oracle of 5:4 announces the punishment. R. L. Smith translates the first *nāqâ* as “purged,” used in the sense of “emptied out” as in Isa 3:26. He translates the second *nāqâ* as “cut off” for some reason. As well, he understands the phrase “from this according to it” simply as an idiomatic way of saying “according to it.” D. L. Petersen understands the phrases descriptively, relying on the normal translation of *nāqâ* as “unpunished”: all who steal have *remained up till now*

unpunished. He argues that the perfect verbs are not future in this context since the curse *is* going forth according to 5:4 because the guilty have not been punished. It is not clear how Petersen understands “from this according to it” to refer to a temporal idea (up till now). C. L. Meyers and E. M. Meyers translate the phrase, “This is the curse over all the land, for every thief according to it has been acquitted, and every perjurer according to it has been acquitted.” They treat *mizzeḥ* (“from this”) as carrying the force of the doublet (thief/perjurer). They see the oath as that sworn by those accused who would exculpate themselves, whether guilty or not. In short, they basically see the verse as a description of the current problematic situation. One could also perhaps translate the phrase “From this (crime), according to the scroll” as an interrogative, rhetorical question: “(Should) all who steal, according to it (the scroll/curse) be acquitted from this (crime)? (Should) all who swear, according to it (the scroll/curse) be acquitted from this (crime)?”

See Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Liturgical Press: Collegeville MN, 2000) 2:617; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco: Word, 1984) 207; David L. Petersen, *Haggai & Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 245; Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8* (AB 25B; Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1987) 277.

punishment probably reflects more on the perception of how pervasive it was in the land than on the actual crimes committed (note that the scroll will traverse “the whole land” in 5:4). Still, there is more at work here than merely the curse of an angry God, as will become evident with the next passage.

CONNECTIONS

The sixth vision changes the focus of the vision cycle. Heretofore, the vision reports have focused on Jerusalem, the temple, and the leadership. This report, however, changes directions in two ways. First, it deals with the guilt of the people throughout the entire country, and second, it deals with ethical concerns: stealing and false witness. In short, this vision report deals with YHWH’s ethical expectations and the implications for people who ignore YHWH’s expectations.

The covenant that YHWH made with Israel and Judah carried with it obligations of a religious and ethical nature. These obligations are summarized in the Decalogue where the first four commandments deal with Israel's relationship to God and the remainder deal with Israel's relationship to human beings. Two of the commandments are highlighted here to suggest that they played a significant role in the problems of the early postexilic period. The allusions are clear. Stealing and bearing false witness were apparently of such concern that this sixth vision depicts YHWH sending out a retaliatory curse into the land—one that will seek out and destroy those perpetrating these crimes. The offenders and their households will suffer from this curse. There will be no escape for those stealing and lying.

The preceding vision reports have been more concerned with reestablishing conditions for YHWH's holiness to be respected in the temple and among the leaders of the returning exiles. Now, however, before entering the reconstructed and reconsecrated temple, YHWH expects to see evidence from the people that a change in behavior has occurred. YHWH expects people to look out for one another, not take from one another. YHWH expects people to speak up for one another and for truth, not to speak lies against one another. The image of the flying scroll, however, presumes that these crimes are so rampant that the new temple will have no chance of success unless the guilt created by the crimes is removed from all the land. As such, it lays the groundwork for the purification of the land—the subject of the subsequent vision report.

In our day, ethical concerns no longer undergird our sense of public life; they surface primarily when ethics are violated. We pride ourselves in establishing systems of justice and legal codes that serve to prevent people from taking advantage of others and to punish those who violate standard ethical expectations. One wonders, though, whether the church has lost its voice as an institution for teaching cultural mores. In the aftermath of the economic crash of 2009, it became clear that large sections of the financial system had broken down because no one had stopped to look at the big ethical picture. Large numbers of financial institutions had followed questionable (but apparently legal) speculative practices until the markets could no longer bear the cumulative weight of those actions. The financial sector had lost its ethical

moorings because greed replaced stewardship as a primary orientation. Profit trumped stability. The resulting financial crash illustrated the dangers for society when basic ethical norms are routed for individuals but not for systems. Stealing and lying are not merely individual acts.

Yet, church leaders have been reticent on issues of social greed. Church leaders have been largely absent in conversations about the need to regulate human behavior in the area of banking and stocks to thwart the all-too-human tendency to cut corners and skirt the boundary between what is legal and what is right.

NOTE

1. David L. Petersen makes this case in reading this report with the others (*Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984] 246).

THE FLOATING BASKET

Zechariah 5:5-11

COMMENTARY

The seventh vision report, Zechariah 5:5-11, depicts the removal of iniquity from the land via a floating basket. Like 5:1-4, this vision report contains only three of the four structural elements, but they are repeated two or three times (see the introduction to the night visions in Zechariah 1). It contains three descriptions of an image (5:5, 7, 9), two questions from the prophet (5:6a, 10), and three explanations from the angel (5:6b, 8, 11). The vision report does not, however, contain any oracular material. The triple replication of these elements makes this vision report the most complex of the eight vision reports in Zechariah. These repeating elements mean that the report unfolds in three successive yet indissoluble stages: the initial vision of the ephah (5:5-6), the contents of the ephah (5:7-8), and the fate of the ephah and its contents (5:9-11).

Zechariah 5:5-6: The Initial Vision of the Ephah. The seventh vision report begins with a reference that ties it to the extended context when it introduces the “angel who was speaking with me” (cf. 1:9, 13, 14, 19 [=MT 2:2]; 2:3 [=MT 2:7]; 4:1, 4, 5; 5:5; 6:4). The angel commands the prophet to “look up and see,” a phrase that also grounds this vision in the context since it elsewhere signals the beginning of a new vision (1:18 [=MT 2:1]; 2:1 [=MT 2:5]; 6:1). What is unique to this vision report, however, is that the latter formula appears as a command rather than the narration of the prophet. The prophet gives the impression of being clueless about what he sees since he immediately asks the angel, “What is it?”

The angel briefly tells the prophet that what he sees is “an ephah coming out.” An ephah is a standard measuring unit, but here it specifically refers to a container for carrying an ephah of something, hence NRSV translates it as a “basket.” [Ephah] Still, the size of this basket would be far too small to hold a normal-sized woman as it sur-

Ephah

An ephah is a unit of measurement that would convert to approximately 9-10 gallons of liquid or 2/3 of a bushel of dry material. While there is no way to determine this measurement with absolute precision, it is clear that an ephah would be some kind of container that would be far too small to hold a normal-sized woman.

prisingly does in 5:7. The angel also states that this basket is “coming out.” Given the location of the temple area presumed in other reports, it is often assumed that the verbal idea here means that the ephah was coming out of the temple area. This makes sense, especially if one reads the widely accepted emendation of 5:6 (“this is *their guilt*”).

[Translating Zechariah 5:6] This interpretation suggests that the guilt of the people is coming out, meaning it will be removed. As such, this vision builds on the theme of the previous one, where a curse had gone forth to track down those guilty of stealing and swearing falsely.

Translating Zechariah 5:6

ΑΩ “This is their iniquity” (NRSV). The MT actually has “This is their eye in all the land.” The MT consonants, *ʿynm* (“their eye”), are easily confused for *ʿwnm* (“their iniquity”), and both LXX and Syriac have the latter reading. This emended reading is followed by the RSV, NRSV, NEB, and NIV, but the NAS translates “their appearance” (similarly the KJV—“semblance”), apparently treating “eye” for appearance since “eye” can refer to what one sees (see Exod 10:5; Lev 13:55). The emendation to iniquity, however, fits the context well since the woman represents wickedness according to 5:8. “Appearance” seems to make little sense.

Zechariah 5:7-8: The Contents of the Ephah. The second stage of the vision reveals that a lead covering on the ephah is removed. The text does not say who removes the lid, but since the angel replaces the lid (5:8), it seems likely that one should presume the angel is the one who pulls back the lid. Lifting the lead cover (lit., “a disk of lead”) reveals a woman sitting

inside the ephah. [Woman] Thus, the image conveys something bizarre given the size of an ephah. It is not possible to fit a full-sized

Woman

At times in the past, the gender of the figure in the ephah was used to highlight the wickedness of women as opposed to men. This misogynistic interpretation should be rejected on theological, linguistic, and textual reasons. Linguistically, abstract nouns in Hebrew, such as wickedness, are typically feminine. Since the element being symbolized is feminine, it only stands to reason that the entity symbolizing it would also be feminine, but not because there is something inherently wicked about women theologically (see Gen 1:26-28). Textually, the emphasis on the gender of the woman in the ephah as a symbol for all women makes no sense, since two women also remove the ephah, a fact conveniently ignored in most such interpretations. Gender therefore plays no substantive role in this vision report.

woman into an ephah. With the lid up, the angel further identifies the woman as “wickedness,” at which point he thrusts her back into the basket and places the “lead stone” over the basket’s opening (lit., over “its [i.e., the ephah’s] mouth”). Thus, with this strange figure captured in a basket, the stage is set to remove the wickedness of the people. Where, however, does one take wickedness once it has been imprisoned?

Zechariah 5:9-11: The Fate of the Ephah and Its Contents. With the “wickedness” imprisoned, the vision report concludes with a description of two women who come forth to dispose of the ephah. The women are, to be sure, not typical women. Zechariah describes them as having wings “like the wings of a stork” with which they fly. These women

are said to have “wind in their wings,” an image often interpreted to mean they glide effortlessly. Ironically, the image of the stork wings raises the issue of cleanliness, since the stork is listed among the unclean animals in the Pentateuch (Deut 14:18; Lev 11:19, which puts them in a class of birds that are “detestable, an abomination”). Yet, despite the aspersions (or maybe because of them) associated with the stork, these women with stork wings are the ones designated for the ultimate act of cleansing the land from wickedness by removing wickedness. The text is careful to point out that the women who remove the ephah containing wickedness do so by flying “between the earth and the heavens.” In other words, as they cleanse the land, they are careful not to touch it with something unholy that would thus contaminate the land again.

As the women fly away, the prophet raises the question: Where are they taking the ephah? The answer to this question subtly but pointedly offers perhaps the most sardonic commentary of the entire book of Zechariah: they are taking the ephah to the land of Shinar, another name for Babylon (see Gen 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Isa 11:11; Dan 1:2). Once there, a house will be built for it. Reference to building a house implies a temple of some type. When the house is prepared, the ephah will be placed there. The presumption appears to be that this new house (for wickedness) will be a place of worship. Thus, the thing is removed from the temple in order to take it to Shinar to be worshiped. This barb at Babylon ridicules the former world power, as if to say, “This place worships what we cast aside—wickedness.”

CONNECTIONS

The seventh vision report does not stand alone, despite its change of imagery. Rather, it functions as a logical progression from the preceding vision report. Whereas the previous vision report warned of the curse that would destroy those in all the land who were stealing and telling lies, this report speaks in more abstract terms of the complete removal of iniquity and wickedness from the land. The result is that the two visions, taken together, speak of a process of cleansing the impurities from the land. The purpose is clear, though left conspicuously unstated: the two vision reports (5:1-4, 5-11) anticipate the cleansing of Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple.

The Woman in the Ephah

The picture here comes from a woodcarving by Johann Christoph Weigel in 1695. Note how the artist includes the vision of the flying scroll to the right of the woman in the ephah who is just about to be locked into the basket.



(Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Digital Image Archive, Candler School of Theology, Emory University)

This cleansing will prepare the land for its function as YHWH's holy site.

The priestly model that lies behind these ideas reflects the conviction that the holiness of YHWH cannot reside in a place of contamination. Thus, the area of the temple ruins would have to be cleansed for God to dwell there; the environs of Jerusalem and Judah would have to be made holy for God to reside again in the land. Consequently, the emphasis on the removal of wickedness in this vision report prepares the land for rebuilding the temple where YHWH's presence would dwell. Those in the land who break YHWH's commands would need to be stopped and the guilt of the land removed in anticipation of YHWH's return.

The idea of YHWH's sacred space rarely serves as a focal point of worship in many Protestant contexts. In the interest of creating energetic, intimate settings for worship, or raucous hours of praise, we lose the awareness of the

awe before YHWH that permeates Old Testament texts. This passage serves as a reminder of the holy otherness of God. In the images of Zechariah's vision, before God will return to the land or enter the temple being constructed, that space must be purified. The guilt and wickedness of the land must be cleansed. How does this happen in our day? In modern traditions, we would do well to pause—even if only occasionally—to remember and to contemplate the awe-filling power of God's overwhelming holiness. To be sure, we are all sinners who come before God in gratitude for the compassion God has bestowed on us. Yet this passage reminds us

that there is a holy quality about God that should make us uncomfortable because it calls us to examine ourselves in light of God's righteousness. Lest we move too quickly and too easily to an image of a sanguine God, always willing to turn a blind eye to our shortcomings, our failures, and our deliberate disobedience of the expectations for justice and righteousness God places before us, we need to contemplate the holiness of God in the places where we worship and in the space we occupy.

HORSES, CHARIOTS, AND ORACLES

Zechariah 6:1-15

COMMENTARY

The final vision report follows the typical pattern of the other vision reports in this cycle (see the introduction to the night visions in Zechariah 1). Structurally, this eighth vision report moves from the portrayal of the vision (6:1-3) to the responses to the vision (6:4-8) and then to a loosely connected oracle that concludes the vision cycle (6:9-15).


Zechariah 6:1-3: Portrayal of the Vision. The final vision report begins with a stylized introduction that is quite similar to the beginnings of the other vision reports. Thereafter, the vision portrayal consists of a general description of chariots coming between two bronze mountains (6:1), followed by a more elaborate description of the horses pulling the chariots (6:2-3). Scholars widely interpret the two bronze mountains as symbolizing the gates of heaven in a manner reminiscent of the function of the two bronze pillars of Solomon's temple, named Jachin and Boaz (1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chr 3:17).

[\[Imagery of the Two Mountains\]](#)

The colors of the horses in 6:2-3 are reminiscent of the colors of the horses in the first vision (1:8). [\[More Colors of the Horses\]](#) This connection subtly links the first and last visions. Similarly, the first vision has the riders returning from a mission (1:10-11), while in the final vision the chariots and riders are going forth on a new mission "patrolling the earth" (6:7).

Zechariah 6:4-8: The Response to the Vision. The response to the vision includes the prophet's question (6:4) and an explanation of the image (6:5-8). In 6:4, the prophet questions the meaning of the vision as with the other visions where the prophet sees multiple elements (1:9; 1:19 [MT 2:2]; 4:4). Similarly, the prophet again directs his inquiry to an accompanying angel whose explanation in this case

Imagery of the Two Mountains

 The image of two mountains has had a long pictographic history, as seen in Mesopotamian cylinders. The picture here portrays the sun-god Shamash cutting his way between two mountains while other deities watch. God’s messengers, however, and not God, are traveling in the chariot in Zechariah. Several seals from the ancient Near East illuminate the meaning of the two mountains as the holy place where the deity’s world meets the human world.



Greenstone seal impression of Adda, Akkadian, from Mesopotamia, c. 2300–c. 2200 BCE. The sun-god Shamash, who has rays rising from his shoulder, is busy cutting his way through the mountains in order to rise at dawn. The god armed with a bow and quiver has not been identified with certainty, but may represent a hunting god like Nusku. British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: © The Trustees of The British Museum/Art Resource, NY)

is rather protracted (6:5-8): the explanation proper (6:5-6) followed by a narrative transition (6:7a), a command to the chariots (6:7b), a narrated change of addressee (6:8a), and a word of comfort from YHWH delivered through the messenger (6:8b).

Understanding the explanation given by the messenger requires information presumed in the messenger’s response. The chariots drawn by horses evoke military images, but in this instance the chariots should be conceived as part of YHWH’s heavenly host. The riders of the chariots, according to the angel, are the “four winds/spirits of heaven” who are going forth. The imagery of the two mountains, in all likelihood, suggests these messengers are

More Colors of the Horses

 Note the similarity of the colors mentioned in the first and last vision reports:

Zech 1:8

red (*’āduṣṣîm*)
sorrel (*šēruqîm*)
white (*lêbânîm*)

Zech 6:2-3

red (*’āduṣṣîm*)
black (*šēḥōrîm*)
white (*lêbânîm*)
dappled gray (*bêruddîm ’āmuṣṣîm*)

Direction

none mentioned
north
west?
south

While only three of the horses have directions associated with them, the combination of colors and directions adds to the impression that the colors are not symbolic but merely help distinguish the various riders. More significantly, the direction of movement—especially when compared with Zech 1:8—suggests that the first group portrays these messengers returning from tasks while 6:2-3 implies that they are moving out with new instructions.

leaving the heavenly temple to “patrol the earth” after having reported to YHWH. In the description, the colors of the horses play no symbolic role; they serve only to distinguish the horses from one another as emissaries heading in different directions. Here, though, some conceptual uncertainties appear. The description of the tasks includes only three of the horses (black, white, and dappled; no mention of the red ones), and the directions are neither comprehensive nor clear. Horses are headed north, south, and possibly west, but there is no mention of horses heading east (or a fourth direction). Moreover, to complicate matters even further, the Hebrew translated as “west country” by the NRSV is debated. [\[Directions\]](#)

The narrative transition (6:7a) provides a sense that God’s emissaries are chomping at the bit, ready to move out on their appointed task. The NRSV translates “they were impatient,” which accurately conveys the nuance: they “went forth and they sought to go.” Immediately upon conveying this information, the messenger commands them to go and patrol the earth. As well, one should not miss the similarity between the tasks these horsemen carry out in both the first and final visions. In the first vision report, these riders report that the world is at rest. In 6:8, however, those spirits are portrayed as having gone forth and set YHWH’s spirit at rest in the north. The text does not specify what happens to the south and the west.

Who are these spirits/winds of heaven, and why is the north country of such concern? This question may be answered from both the broader context of Old Testament traditions and from Zechariah. In the broader context, Old Testament prophetic texts display an ongoing tradition of the threat from the north country. The north country is the place from which attacks come from Assyria and Babylon (Isa 14:31; Jer 1:14-15; 6:1, 22; 15:12; 46:20, 24; Ezek 26:7; 38:6; 39:2; Zeph 2:13). This seems odd geographically to modern minds since Assyria and Babylon lie east of Palestine. When on military campaigns, however, these powers fol-

Directions

AO According to the NRSV, three of the chariots go different directions (black—north [land of Zaphon]; white—west [to their after-parts]; dappled—south [the land of the Teman]). Presumably, none go east because there is no destination listed with the red horse (6:6; cf. 6:2). However, the NRSV is based on an emended text. Literally, the word translated “west” in the MT means “to after them” (*’ēl-’aḥārêhem*). Since this phrase is awkward, there is the sense that something needs to be changed. As a result, the NRSV assumes the reading “to beyond the sea” (*’ēl-’aḥrāy yām*), meaning toward the Mediterranean. “Zaphon” means north because it is the mountain in the far north of Syria, often associated with Baal-Zaphon (Ezek 40:20; Jer 25:26). The term translated as “South” in 6:6 is “Teman.” Teman was an Edomite region, but it also appears elsewhere as the designation of a direction (e.g., Ezek 21:2; Isa 43:6). As with the colors, questions about specific symbolic value for the colors or the directions do not yield specific values. Instead, the function of the messengers appears to presume they are setting out at dawn with new instructions.

Recurring Elements



Zechariah 6:1-5 contains elements similar to the other visions:

Final Vision	Related Element	Parallel in Other Visions
6:2-3	Colored horses	1:8 (first vision)
6:7	going/coming to patrol the earth	1:10-11 (first vision)
6:5	“all the earth/land”	1:11; 4:10; 4:14; 5:3; 5:6 (visions 1, 5, 6, 7)
6:1 (bronze)	Metal	5:7 (lead, seventh vision), 4:2, 12 (gold; fifth vision)
6:1, 5, 6 (3x), 7, 8	“Go forth” (<i>yāšâ</i>)	2:7 (2x); 4:7; 5:3, 4, 5 (2x), 6, 9 (visions 3, 5, 6, 7)
6:5	“winds/spirits of the heavens” and “land of the north”	2:6 (third vision; MT 2:10)

David L. Petersen, *Haggai & Zechariah 1–8* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 271–72.


lowed the more hospitable land of the fertile crescent, meaning that the enemies actually arrived from the north. This land is also the place to which the exiles were taken and, hence, from which the exiles would return (Isa 43:6; 49:12; Jer 3:18; 16:15; 23:8; 31:8). Within the context of Zechariah 2:6 (MT 2:10), the third of Zechariah’s night visions, it is YHWH who had scattered the people to the land of the north “like the four winds of heaven.” Consequently, in 6:8, when the winds of heaven cause YHWH’s spirit to be at rest, they have reversed that action.

This entire vision report picks up motifs and vocabulary from many of the visions. [Recurring Elements] It thus functions as a type of repository for the entire collection and in many ways concludes the vision reports with an image of starting anew: a people returned from exile start afresh and begin to construct a new temple; they live in a newly purified land (visions 6 and 7), and God’s emissaries receive a new task (vision 8). A second ending, however, comes in the form of an oracle that has been attached to this vision report; by contrast, this ending focuses on the anticipated leaders.

Zechariah 6:9-15: A Concluding Oracle. The concluding oracle raises interesting questions in its context. As in most of the other vision reports with oracular components, the oracle relates structurally to the elements seen in the vision. [Oracles and their Connections to their Respective Visions] Such is not the case, however, with the material in 6:9-15. Yet this lack of structural connection to the immediate context does not mean that this oracle is some isolated fragment. Rather, this concluding oracle subtly picks up on the other vision reports, especially the fourth and fifth.

Whereas the vision report of 6:1-8 concerns the emissaries and horses going forth to patrol the earth, the oracle that follows shifts

Oracles and their Connections to their Respective Visions

 Most of the visions (excluding visions two and seven) contain oracular material that relates thematically to the surrounding visions, providing both a sense of continuity and progression.

Vision	Oracle(s)	Connections to Vision Reports
1	1:16-17	Thematic connections backward (fate of YHWH’s cities and Zion in 1:17) and forward (measuring line in 1:16, cf. 2:1 [MT 2:5]).
2	none	(See the thematic connection with the oracle in the third vision)
3	2:8-9; 2:10-12	The threat to the nations (2:8-9) picks up on the theme of the second vision, while the promise of increase for Zion and Judah (2:11-12) takes up the motif of YHWH protecting Zion by his presence from the third vision report (2:1-5) to which the oracle is attached.
4	3:6-10	Addresses Joshua directly and assumes Joshua’s purification, which was the subject of the vision report in 3:1-5.
5	4:6b-10a	Exalts Zerubbabel, who is interpreted as the second tree described in the fifth vision report (4:6a), along with Joshua assumed from the fourth vision (3:1) as the anointed ones of God (pairs with the oracle in vision four).
6	5:4	Focuses on the effects of the scroll that goes forth to purify the land according to the sixth vision.
7	none	(Note, however, that the vision itself takes up motifs in 6:2-3 from the first vision report, especially 1:8-10.)
8	6:9-15?	Relates thematically to the 4th and 5th visions and the roles of Zerubbabel and Joshua.

to focus on two figures. Specifically, the subsequent oracle (6:9-15) proclaims that a man, the branch, will build the temple in “this place” and have a priest at his right hand. The only connection to the eighth vision (i.e., 6:1-8) appears to be the presumption of the temple locale (6:12) via the image of two mountains in the vision report. The oracular material has no direct connection to the horses, chariots, or emissaries in the vision report. Instead of relating to the vision report it follows, Zechariah 6:9-15 more readily connects to other visions in the vision cycle, especially the fourth and fifth visions’ focus on the roles of Zerubbabel and Joshua.

The logic of this oracle can be subdivided into two sections: a narrative introduction comprised of a three-stage series of commands (take . . . and go, take . . . and make, place . . . and say) to the prophet (6:9-12aα) and a three-part oracle (6:12aβ-13, 14, 15), which is integrally connected to the introduction.

Regarding the narrative introduction, Zechariah 6:9-12aα begins with a word event formula that has appeared three times previously in Zechariah (1:7; 4:6, 8), but only once (4:8) in this precise form: “And the word of YHWH came to me, saying: . . .” (6:9). The narrative then unfolds three stages of activity that culminate in an oracle to Joshua. First, the prophet is commanded to collect gold

Josiah, Son of Zephaniah

Intentional or not, it is noteworthy that in the Book of the Twelve the destruction of Jerusalem is last predicted by Zephaniah, in the days of Josiah (Zeph 1:1), while the temple power is reconstituted in the house of Josiah, son of Zephaniah. The name “Josiah,” however, is spelled in two different ways, which suggests this connection was not intentionally created.

and silver from the exiles and take it to the house of Josiah, son of Zephaniah. [Josiah, Son of Zephaniah] The text mentions three leaders (Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah) from among the exiles returning from Babylon who will take charge of collecting silver and gold (cf. 6:10, 11). Further, the agency

and urgency of the task is accentuated in the command that “*You go on that day and at that time*” to the house of Josiah (6:10). While it is not entirely clear, the reference to the house of Josiah suggests that Josiah was part of the group of Judeans already living in the land, meaning that the returning exiles were expected to bring gifts to the influential people already living in the land.¹ Still, the expectation of help from those who had been around long enough to build their own houses appears to make an impact on Haggai.

Second, the purpose of this collection of precious metals is then revealed through two further commands in 6:11. They are to *take* the silver and gold and *make* crowns for the chief priest, Joshua. The third movement of the narrative introduction explains the purpose of the crowns; they are to be *placed* on the head of Joshua, the high priest, after which the prophet is to *speak* a message to Joshua. The crown presents an ambiguous element in this oracle. Twice the word “crowns” appears in plural form (6:11, 14), but only the high priest Joshua is mentioned as the one who will wear the crowns. As a result, most English versions translate “crown” as singular. That there is more than one crown mentioned creates the expectation that there should be more than one person wearing them. Thus, presumably this oracle originally referenced both Zerubbabel and Joshua as recipients of these crowns, but subsequent political events prompted the removal of direct references to Zerubbabel. In short, the evidence that original references to Zerubbabel were removed or replaced from this oracle is quite strong, and this action suggests a deliberate attempt in the text’s redactional history to downplay Zerubbabel’s role as political leader who might threaten the Persian king Darius.² That being said, it is all the more noteworthy that the high priest is crowned, while the mysterious “branch” is only credited with reconstructing the temple in the final form of this text (see 6:13). It leaves the impression that power was to be shared between the religious and the political authority.

Regarding the three-part oracle of Zechariah 6:12ab-13, 14, 15, Zechariah 6:12ab begins with a messenger formula introducing a divinely authorized speech. The first part of the oracle (6:12b-13) introduces the man whose name is Branch and credits this person with being the one to build the temple. [Branch] This branch is also described with royal attributes (he will sit and rule on his throne). Thus, since the chief priest stands by his side, this character must be identified as Zerubbabel, the descendant of Davidic kings. Despite these attributes, however, Zerubbabel is never called “king,” and is here not even mentioned by name. This lack of specificity only bolsters the suggestion that Zerubbabel’s role was deliberately downplayed over time.

The second part of the oracle (6:14) describes the people responsible for the safekeeping of the crowns, essentially relisting those mentioned in 6:10 who represent the returnees and the people already in the land (see discussion of 6:10). Most English translations, however, change two of the names in 6:14 so that they match the same four people mentioned in 6:10, but the names are not identically recorded:

6:10	Heldai	Tobijah	Jedaiah	Josiah, son of Zephaniah
6:14	<i>Helem</i>	Tobijah	Jedaiah	<i>Hen</i> , son of Zephaniah

There is no satisfactory text-critical explanation for the different names. The options are only that the names were either intended to refer to the same four people or that two of those responsible for making the crowns were not responsible for its care and storage. Special care was to be given the crowns during the times when they were not required for official use. The crowns were to be set aside as a memorial in the temple, presumably until such a time as they would be needed again.

The concluding part of the oracle (6:15) confirms the significance of the crowns as a symbol of the exiles’ participation in the reconstitution of the temple. The statement indicates that “those who are far off” shall come to help build the temple. Hence, this new initiative involved a coalition of those who had been present in

Branch



Using the messenger formula, the prophet is commanded in 6:12 to name the chief priest “branch,” for he will branch out and build the temple. (6:12) The problem of identifying the branch, however, is complex. The broader context of the Old Testament creates the expectation of a Davidic ruler, given the famous text of Jer 33:15: “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” In Zech 3:8—the only other time this word “branch” appears in Zechariah—the term refers to someone other than the high priest Joshua and would seem to imply Zerubbabel. It is thus suggestive that someone has downplayed the role of Zerubbabel in the book by removing direct references to him as the branch, while still leaving an expectation of a “branch” to come. Still, it is hard to ignore that the final form of 6:12 seems clearly to associate the branch with the high priest Joshua in Zechariah.

the land (those who had tried and failed to rebuild the temple) and those who were returning to the land of their heritage with excitement and resources to finish the task. It is here that the oracle subtly connects to the theme of the mission of the emissaries who have gone to the north to prepare the return of the exiles (6:8).

CONNECTIONS

The oracle in 6:9-15 picks up the themes addressed in the fourth and fifth visions, which introduce the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel respectively. Taken together, these three units display an interest in regulating the ruling structures of Judah's postexilic community. The political power vested in Zerubbabel is placed on a par with that of the high priest and the religious power of the country. This empowerment creates intriguing problems on two fronts. On the one hand, there is a decided effort to equalize the authority of the chief priest with that of the ruling governor. Such a portrayal implies a power-sharing system of some kind that recognizes an officially sanctioned place for religious authority in the life of the community. Such sharing of power would require certain limits on the governor's influence that the prophet's visions are anticipating. As well, such a vision elevates the demands of YHWH on the rulers.

On the other hand, the claims of political power for "the branch" probably placed Zerubbabel in some tension with his Persian superiors—assuming they learned of the expectations associated with Zerubbabel as a Davidic heir. Royal images used by the prophet would likely have been seen by Zerubbabel's superiors as a potential threat. The Persian king, Darius I, was putting down a significant number of local rebellions during his first years of power (c. 521–519 BCE). This setting makes it plausible to think that Zerubbabel's Davidic heritage, once seen as an asset, could have become a liability if Darius grew concerned that the grandson of Jehoiachin had designs on reinstituting the Davidic monarchy. Thus, it is often suggested that Zerubbabel was removed from power by Darius; too many expectations (like those of Zechariah and Haggai [see 2:20-23]) would have made him appear to be a threat to Darius, even if Zerubbabel had had no such designs. In some way, the fear for, or response to, Zerubbabel's fate probably

affected the Zechariah tradition. The prophet's hope either went unrealized, meaning Zerubbabel's role was downplayed, Zerubbabel himself was not interested in pursuing a larger role, or Zerubbabel attempted to lead a rebellion but was quickly removed. At any rate, the political power of David's descendant never appears to have achieved the status Zechariah envisioned.³

Even today, the dangers of mixing religion, politics, and power are never far from the surface. The Old Testament often reflects a sense of discomfort with aligning religious power too closely to political power, for religious power must remain subservient to YHWH, while political power (whether ancient kings, medieval monarchs, or modern oligarchies) often answers only to itself. When such aligning transpires, religious institutions become pawns of the state.

More positively, what is accomplished as a result of the prophet's ministry, as seen in the oracular material, should not be overlooked. People who had returned from exile and become disheartened were rallied by those returning with gifts to build the temple, to reconstitute the community as God's people, and to reinstitute worship at YHWH's house. Those returning joined with those already in the land to find a way to move forward for God's sake. The prophet saw change happening. God's anger had abated; God's land had been purified; God's people had been tested; and God's house would be rebuilt. In Zechariah's visions, God acts to remove enemy nations, to restore Jerusalem, to cleanse the land, and to commission the leaders. This sense of cooperation, even in the midst of conflicting interests, should serve as a model for today's communities of faith. The visions end with a sense of optimism that things are looking up. The sayings that follow (chapters 7–8) call the community to see God's work underway.

NOTES

1. The people mentioned in 6:10, 13 cannot be equated with any confidence to people known elsewhere. David L. Petersen (*Haggai & Zechariah 1–8* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995] 274–75) treats the act of taking the valuables to Josiah as an act of integration on the part of the exiles, assuming that Josiah had already been there for some time. By contrast, Marvin A. Sweeney (*The Twelve Prophets* [Berit Olam; Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2000] 2.630) states his opinion that Josiah also came from Babylon. Sweeney, however, does not provide reasons for his confidence.

2. Sweeney, for example, documents several reasons why Zerubbabel was probably the original recipient of a crown: (1) crowns are generally given to kings and queens, not priests; (2) the designation "branch" that follows generally refers to a royal figure, not a priestly one; (3) the figure of the branch in Zech 3:8 is not Joshua; (4) kings build and repair temples in the Old Testament, not priests; (5) 6:13 presumes two figures—only one of which is a (high) priest. (See Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 2.628–29.)

3. See J. J. M. Roberts, "A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction," *Int* 33 (1979): 240–53. Roberts notes that a significant number of predictions in the prophets fall into the category of "predictions which did not come to pass and will never come to pass" (242). Other categories of predictions include the following: those that have already come to pass, those as yet unfulfilled, and those whose fulfillment occurs in a way that is not literal.

SAYINGS FOR THE DELEGATION FROM BETHEL

Zechariah 7:1–8:23

COMMENTARY

The extended unit, Zechariah 7–8, constitutes a collection of sayings and admonitions (7:4–8:17) framed by the report of a delegation's question (7:1-3) and its literarily delayed response (8:18-23). The combination invites the reader to reflect on the meaning of the exile, the nature of worship, and the work of YHWH in the present. The themes treated in these chapters overlap with those raised in Zechariah 1–6 and the Book of the Twelve at large.

Formally, the structure of the subunits revolves around their introductions, marked by combinations of the word event formula and messenger formulas. [Word Event Formulas and Messenger Formulas] These repeating introductory formulas provide a sense of continuity and discontinuity. Particularly, their repetition creates a sense of cohesion, but since these formulas often introduce new units in prophetic literature, they also create the impression of an overabundance of beginnings. Regrettably, the resulting staccato character of these

Word Event Formulas and Messenger Formulas

AΩ These introductory formulas vary slightly, but the cumulative effect is clear. They give the impression of a collection of sayings that begin new units every few verses.

Word Event Formulas

7:1: "The word of the LORD came to Zechariah"
7:4: "The word of the LORD came to me"
7:8: "The word of the LORD came to Zechariah"
8:1: "The word of the LORD came to me"
8:18: "The word of the LORD came to me"

Messenger Formulas

7:9: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:2: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:3: "Thus says the LORD"
8:4: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:6: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:7: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:9: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:14: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:19: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:20: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"
8:23: "Thus says the LORD of Hosts"

Bethel in Zechariah 7

The city of Bethel is only 12 miles north of Jerusalem, but its history as the principal cultic site of the northern kingdom means that it receives more focus in the Twelve as a negative symbol than as a place that is friendly to the interests of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the history of Bethel is intricately woven into some of the oldest narrative accounts of the Old Testament, and its religious and political role throughout the early period is quite complex. According to Robert Coote (439), Bethel played no major cultic role in the Persian period, however, which might explain why a delegation sent emissaries to Jerusalem (Zech 7:2).

For further reading, see Robert Coote, "Bethel, Shrine," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 1:435–39.



chapters masks the pivotal role as thematic summary that these chapters perform within the book.

Zechariah 7:1-3: Shall We Continue to Mourn? This subunit begins with a dated introduction that is similar to those in Zechariah 1:1, 7. Two notable differences, however, stand out. First, there is no genealogical material about the prophet (which is understandable since that was provided earlier). Second, this introductory word event formula is set nearly two years later (December 7, 518 BCE) than the last one in 1:7 (February 19, 519 BCE). Thus, for the reader, a significant amount of time has passed since the onset of the vision cycle.

Zechariah 7:2-3 narrates the arrival of a formal delegation from Bethel asking a question

to the prophet. The arrival of this delegation stands out for its point of origin and its tasks. First, apart from one reference in Hosea 12:4 that cites Bethel as the place of divine revelation for Jacob, other references to Bethel in the Book of the Twelve appear in Amos with a decidedly negative tone that describes it as a place of improper worship (Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5, 6; 7:10, 13). Bethel was the primary religious center of what used to be the northern kingdom, containing one of two altars built by Jeroboam II and roundly condemned in the Deuteronomistic History (see [Deuteronomistic History]). This leads to a second surprise, the tasks for which this delegation comes: (1) to entreat the favor of YHWH, a phrase that means to offer sacrifice to appease (see also Mal 1:8-9), and (2) to consult with the priests and prophets in Jerusalem regarding whether the time for fasting in the fifth month was fin-

ished. The implications of the question are significant since the delegation raises the possibility of the reunification of the land, at least in terms of recognizing Jerusalem's temple as the place for the worship of YHWH.

In 7:3, the speaker asks whether he should continue fasting and consecrating himself in the fifth month. The fast of the fifth month refers to the days of ritual fasting in order to lament the destruction of Jerusalem's temple in 587 (see [Exilic Fast Days]). The significance of the question coming from this group is accentuated by the delayed response it receives. Narratively speaking, the report of the inquiry remains unanswered until Zechariah 8:18-19. Thus, the compiler of Zechariah 7–8 used the question from this delegation and its delayed response to frame the larger unit. When the response at the end of Zechariah 8 finally comes, it is clear that the time of mourning is indeed over. Yet it is the encapsulated material (7:4–8:17)—material that recapitulates several recurring themes from Zechariah 1–6—that creates a rationale for the end of mourning for Jerusalem.

Zechariah 7:4-7: Examine Your Hearts. This subunit contains an introductory word event formula (7:4-5a) followed by three rhetorical questions (7:5b-7). The formula introduces a message relayed to a new group, specifically the people of the land and the priests, not the Bethel delegation. As such, it is usually considered a brief independent saying that has been placed here to help the reader contemplate the full impact of the moment. The compiler picks up the theme of exilic fasts raised in 7:1-3, but 7:4-7 focuses on the people's motivation for worship.

The prophet pronounces a series of three rhetorical questions designed to force the readers to examine their behavior and their motivation. First, he asks why the people and priests had fasted and mourned. Did they fast and lament for YHWH's sake or for themselves? The reference to seventy years refers to the approximate number of years since Jerusalem's destruction. Reading 7:5 with the

Exilic Fast Days



A variety of texts refer to days of fasting during the exile.

Exilic Days of Fasting

Fourth month, day 9

Fifth month (day 7 or 10)

Seventh month

Tenth month, day 10 (589)

Reason

— Breach in the wall of Jerusalem

— Burning of the Jerusalem and the temple

— Gedaliah's assassination

— Beginning of the siege by Nebuchadnezzar

Scripture

2 Kgs 25:3-4; Jer 39:2; 52:6-7

2 Kgs 25:8 (7th day); Jer 52:12 (10th)

Jer 41:1-2; 2 Kgs 25:25

2 Kgs 25:1; Jer 39:1; 52:4

chronological note of 7:1 dating the unit to late 518 BCE means that the next round of lamentations would begin in a few months, and these would mark seventy years since Jerusalem's destruction. Temple reconstruction is not yet complete, but it is well underway. In the background stands Jeremiah's prediction that the exile would last seventy years before Babylon would be destroyed and the people returned (cf. Jer 25:11-12; 29:10; Zech 1:12). The delegation from Bethel had asked whether it was time to stop lamenting, but 7:4-7 wants the people and priests to examine their motives. Implicitly, 7:5 admonishes the people to realize the importance of maintaining proper respect before YHWH. Yet this first question also contains an implicit accusation, for it is formulated as a challenge. The people had not really fasted for YHWH. Rather, they fasted for themselves; they fasted to get YHWH to act on their behalf.

The second question (7:6) extends the admonition from the opposite side of the coin, asking the group whether they only dedicate themselves to YHWH on special occasions: *When you are not fasting, what are you doing?* The implication is that all of life belongs to YHWH, not just the "sacred" times. However, just as 7:5 suggests that the people and the priests were fasting out of self-interest, 7:6 implies that the people acted out of self-interest as well.

The third rhetorical question (7:7) raises the issue of the continuity of God's message. Here, the prophet frames a rather ominous question by asking essentially, "What has changed?" The question implies the answers to the two previous questions; in short, nothing had changed in the relationship between the people, the priests, and YHWH during this period.

This third rhetorical question draws a connection to the message of the former prophets whom YHWH had sent in more peaceful times. [Former Prophets] Now the underlying problem surfaces, for the reader/hearers would know that the people had rejected these earlier words (see also Zech 1:4-5). What is more, like this earlier generation, the current generation was too concerned with their own needs and desires to reflect on the goal of weeping and mourning. Taken together, these rhetorical questions invite the hearer/reader to ask, *What constitutes genuine worship?* Even at this point, the question of this people's response to YHWH has not been fully answered. What will this generation do?

Zechariah 7:8-14: A Lesson from History to Act Ethically. This unit is introduced by a word event formula (7:8) followed by an introductory messenger formula (7:9a). The content of the remaining verses offers a historical summation that reviews in ethical and theological terms the history of YHWH's people from the entry into the land to the exile.

Four rhetorical elements comprise this summary. The first statement provides God's expectations for the people (7:9b-10). These expectations display a decidedly ethical slant for the community: the justice system should render verdicts accurately ("render true judgments"); the powerless of society should not be abused ("do not oppress the widow, the orphan, and the alien or the poor"); and people should treat one another respectfully ("do not devise evil in your hearts against one another"). These ideas summarize the ethical implication of Israel's legal tradition. Next, the second element shifts from expectations to historical recollection (7:11-12a) by reminding the reader that previous generations stubbornly refused to meet these expectations. They chose not to obey the commands or listen to the former prophets whom YHWH sent to confront the people. Thus, the images stress the willing disregard of YHWH. Moreover, the prophet is not speaking about the occasional slip-up, but a lifestyle of wanton disregard for YHWH's covenant expectations. The third element (7:12b-13) then explains *why* Jerusalem and Judah suffered the "great wrath" of YHWH. Since YHWH's people had ignored YHWH's call to them, YHWH would ignore the people when they called to YHWH. Finally, the result of the wrath (7:14) is depicted as the scattering of the people and the desolation of the land.

This historical summary has affinities with the beginning of Zechariah (1:2-6) in that it looks back on the failures of previous generations. Two significant differences appear, however, when comparing these two passages. First, Zechariah 7:8-14 puts less emphasis on the implications of this summary for the current generation, though they are implicit. They lie just below the surface, and the preceding unit (7:4-7) raised this issue quite pointedly.

Former Prophets



Who are these former prophets? To be sure, they include Jeremiah, given the reference to the seventy-year tradition that is cited (see Jer 25:10-11; 29:10; 33:14; and [Seventy Years] in Zech 1). Literarily, referring to these prophets may also assume that the reader recalls the beginning of the Book of the Twelve, especially Joel. The combination of fasting, mourning, and weeping reminds the careful reader of Joel 2:12, the pivotal verse in Joel that admonishes the people, "Yet even now, says YHWH, return to me with all your heart *with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning*; rend your hearts and not your clothes." The external actions should be signs of an inward commitment to turn to YHWH. The admonition in Zech 7:5 (building on 7:3) reiterates God's expectation that any mourning must come from the heart and affect the whole person.

Zechariah 7:8-14, however, does not explicitly challenge the people of the current generation to change; rather, it implicitly admonishes them not to become like God's people of the past. In this respect, the historical recollection is explaining the reasons for the period of punishment. A second element distinguishing this unit from Zechariah 1:2-6 is the ethical focus. Zechariah 1:2-6 centers on the call to repentance, while 7:4-7 focuses on the internal motivation for worship. By contrast, 7:8-14 centers on the behavior YHWH expects humans to exhibit toward one another, especially those less fortunate. In this respect, the combination of the three historical summaries suggests that the early postexilic period suffered from an age-old problem. Getting people to turn to YHWH in repentance is one thing, but getting them to recognize God's expectations of their social obligations to the oppressed is another thing entirely.

YHWH Is on Our Side, 8:1-17

Zechariah 8:1-17 continues the pattern of short units beginning with word event formulas, but these verses also contain seven messenger formulas that introduce even shorter subunits of the chapter (8:2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 14). In a real sense, these units deal with themes that have already arisen in the vision reports. In short, the grouping of these thematic units provides the chapter with the character of a theological summary of the book, much like the way Amos 8 functions in its context. Language and themes are rehearsed in a rapid staccato style that emphasizes the centrality of Zion in God's plan, the need for ethical living, and the need to see God at work in the midst of current events. The subunits in 8:1-17 have a promissory character strengthened by a general shift to divine first person speech in these units, when compared to the units in chapter 7 or to the response that follows in 8:18-23.

Zechariah 8:1-2: I Am Jealous for Zion. A word event formula leads directly to a messenger formula, forming an extended introduction to a brief saying that reaffirms YHWH's zeal for Zion. This zeal displays itself in YHWH's wrath toward unnamed enemies. The formulation in 8:2 essentially repeats the words of YHWH from the first vision report in 1:14, where the context clearly implies that God's wrath is directed toward the surrounding nations who took advantage of Jerusalem/Zion when YHWH pun-

ished her. Such nations would seem to be implied in the phrasing of Zechariah 8:2, even though these surrounding nations are not specifically mentioned. At any rate, YHWH, like a jealous husband, promises to act on Zion's behalf—presumably to protect her from the surrounding nations.

The presumed recipient of the wrath naturally affects one's understanding of the function of this verse. In 1:14, the jealousy toward Jerusalem is a sign of comfort for Jerusalem since it leads to punishment of the nations oppressing her. Marvin A. Sweeney sees the jealousy in 8:2 as the rationale for the prior punishment of Jerusalem, but such is not the case in Zechariah 1:14.¹ Since the material elsewhere in chapter 8 recapitulates material from Zechariah 1–6, it seems likely that 8:2 should be read in that light. Further, it seems unlikely that the isolated concept of an impending punishment for Jerusalem would be introduced here in such a brief context. Rather, in this context, God's jealousy leads to God's promise of protection. Thus, the wrath implied in 8:2 seems more likely to be wrath directed against the foreign nations than against Jerusalem.

Zechariah 8:3: I Will Return to Zion and Jerusalem. Similar to 8:2, Zechariah 8:3 takes up language from the first vision with its promise of YHWH's decision to return (cf. 1:16) to the city. Whereas the first vision adds temple reconstruction to the promise, this pronouncement in 8:3 promises that YHWH will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, a promise made all the more possible by the later date (8:3 is set two years later—see 7:1), during which temple construction had begun and the subsequent cleansing of the temple site, the leaders, the people, and the land as seen in the vision cycle (1:7–6:15).

Jerusalem will be recognized as a faithful city (lit., “a city of the truth”). This promise has more extensive connotations than just a pietistic platitude. One of the recurring themes throughout the prophetic corpus concerns the fidelity/infidelity of Jerusalem. Near the beginning of the Latter Prophets (Isa 1:21), the “faithful city” Jerusalem has become a prostitute, and the imagery of the land as a prostitute features prominently in Hosea 1–3, the beginning of the Book of the Twelve. Consequently, the promise that Jerusalem will again be seen as a faithful city means that the situation of sin that has dominated the prophetic corpus will be reversed. YHWH's decision to return to Jerusalem is also a prominent motif in the

promissory sections of Ezekiel (note that the departing glory in Ezek 11:23 returns to Jerusalem in 43:2).

In short, with temple construction underway, YHWH's decision to return to Jerusalem leads to recognition of the restored reputation of Zion (she will once again be the "faithful city"). With the soon-to-be-functioning temple, the mountain of YHWH will again be known as the holy mountain of YHWH, another prominent idea in the Zion tradition, in the Book of the Twelve (see Joel 2:1; 3:17 [MT 4:17]; Obad 16; Zeph 3:11), and in Isaiah (11:9; 27:13;

Zion Theology in Zechariah



Zion theology forms a major backdrop for numerous psalms and several prophetic collections. Its major ideas center on three issues: YHWH chose David to lead his people; YHWH chose Zion as the place of his dwelling; and YHWH will protect Zion from its enemies. See Jon D. Levenson, "Zion Traditions," *ABD* 6: 1099–1101; John H. Hayes, "The Traditions of Zion's Inviolability," *JBL* 82 (1963): 419–26; J. J. M. Roberts, "The Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition," *JBL* 92 (1973): 329–44; and the essays in Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *Zion, City of Our God* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

56:7; 57:13; 65:11, 25; 66:20). These promises reaffirm one of the core tenets of Zion theology: YHWH has (again) chosen Jerusalem as the place of his dwelling. [Zion Theology in Zechariah]

Zechariah 8:4–5: The City Will Be Filled with Young and Old. These verses offer a promise of radical normalcy. The messenger formula in 8:4 introduces a promise that is remarkable for the placid, mundane images it conveys regarding the activity in the streets of Jerusalem. Yet for those who had experienced life in the devastated region of Jerusalem, or even those who had returned from Babylon to find a city in disarray

and dilapidation, these images offer a realistic word of hope. They describe a scene in which old men and women sit in the streets peacefully, while the young girls and boys play in those streets— young and old, male and female—live unconcerned for their safety. These images are in many ways not remarkable. Such images are the kinds of things one would normally expect from a life of peace and tranquility. However, for those whose city had been destroyed and its population largely removed, these images were far from reality at the time of Zechariah. In the aftermath of traumatic periods, what could bring more comfort than the image of life undisturbed by war, repopulation journeys, or rebuilding projects? Sometimes hope is most powerful when it is at its most ordinary.

Zechariah 8:6: Do You Think This Is Too Difficult for YHWH? Context is an important issue in interpreting this verse. The numerous introductory messenger formulas have sometimes led erroneously to the conclusion that the verses in chapter 8 comprise prophetic sayings that are fragmentary sayings from the prophet as recalled by those who knew him. As such, the rhetorical question

of 8:6 would simply be a statement affirming God's power to do things that human beings cannot. However, reference to the remnant here presumes a specific context, and the literary implications would thus point back to the previous promise in 8:4-5. Using a rhetorical question, Zechariah 8:6 affirms that God can do what the "remnant of this people on this day" thinks is impossible. The word translated as "impossible" (from the Hebrew root *pālāʾ*) in the NRSV means "marvelous," "wonderful," or "amazing." The verb often refers to God's marvelous acts. In its context, however, 8:6 refers to the preceding promises given by YHWH to Jerusalem. God will return to Jerusalem (8:3) and life will return to normal (8:4-5). The fact that this statement must even be made shows that the prophet faced skepticism from people who did not think God would return or that God could restore the ruins of the city and the temple to its former glory. Here, in the face of implied skepticism, the prophet, speaking for YHWH, calls the people to believe that God *is* at work in their midst. Haggai alludes to similar questions of doubt with a promise of agricultural blessing at the beginning of the temple reconstruction process (see Hag 2:18-19).

Zechariah 8:7-8: My People Will Inhabit Jerusalem in Truth and Righteousness. Following another messenger formula, these two verses offer a three-fold promise. Specifically, YHWH will save his people from foreign countries, bring them back to Jerusalem, and be God to them in truth and righteousness. The first promise affirms God's plan to deliver God's people from the east and the west. The use of *hinneh*, followed by a participle, accents the imminent salvific action: "Behold, I am about to deliver." It affirms the identity of the recipients of God's deliverance. Deliverance belongs to YHWH's people who have been scattered to the east and west. "East" and "west" do not highlight the same directions or use the same terms as in the final vision report (6:5-6). Rather, in 8:7, the directions are given in relation to the sun: literally "from the land of the sun's rising and setting" (i.e., the east and the west). This polarity expands the spatial perspective of the text, especially since it is unclear just whom YHWH will rescue from the west. It seems wiser to understand this merism as a poetic expression meaning the entire known world. [Merism] In that sense, it parallels other prophetic texts that anticipate the repopulation of Jerusalem as part of the restoration God intends for Judah (see Zech 2:4; Zeph 3:19-20; Jer 30:10-11; Isa 60:4). The second promise (Zech

Merism

A merism is a rhetorical phrase or combination of words where two or more elements are used to refer to the totality of something, such as heaven and earth in Gen 1:1 to refer to the entire cosmos.

8:8a)—that God will bring these exiles back to Jerusalem—merely expounds the implications of the first promise (8:7). Once YHWH rescues his people, he will bring them to Jerusalem to live. Finally, the third promise (8:8b) anticipates a happily-ever-after ending when the relationship between YHWH and the people has been restored. God acknowledges that this people belongs to him, and they see YHWH as their God in “truth and in righteousness.” This particular combination presents attributes of YHWH that appear elsewhere to accentuate the enduring fidelity of God as God relates to humans (see 1 Kgs 3:6; Jer 4:2) even when humans do not respond in kind (Isa 48:1).

Zechariah 8:9-13: The Past Has Implications for the Present and the Future. This passage begins with an introductory messenger formula and is marked at the beginning and end by an exhortative inclusio: “Let your hands be strong” (8:9, 13). In addition, this passage is structured chronologically to flow from a reminder of the past to its implications for the present and the future. [Chronological Structure of Zechariah 8:9-12] Thus, the passage marks a pivotal moment that revolves around the rebuilding of the temple as a turning point

Chronological Structure of Zechariah 8:9-12

The chronological markers address the current generation (8:9) about the past (8:10), the present (8:11), and the future (8:13) with respect to the aftermath of laying the temple foundation.

8:9 Those hearing *in these days* . . . these words from the mouth of the prophets . . . *on the day* when the foundation of the temple was laid

8:10 *For before those days* . . .

8:11 *And now* . . .

8:13 *And it will be* . . .

for Judah and the people who have returned from exile. However, this unit has more than just the book of Zechariah in its literary horizon. It reaches back to the words of Haggai (see below), and it marks a major shift in the recurring fertility motif of the Book of the Twelve. (See [Fertility of the Land in the Book of the Twelve] in the discussion of Joel 2:18.) The passage contains an admonition to the current generation to remain strong (8:9)

and to remember what life was like before the rebuilding of the temple began (8:10). The unit moves to a promise that times have changed for the better (8:11) and that in the future the nations will see this change (8:13).

The tone of this passage is set by the admonishment to remain strong in the face of continuing trial (8:9, 13). The chronological structure then clarifies the trial as the trouble experienced by God’s people since the temple was destroyed. After the temple’s destruction in 587 BCE, Judah became a laughing stock to the surrounding nations, for this proud city that had earlier claimed a special rela-

tionship with God had in turn been humiliated by the Babylonians. The reasons for the destruction, as is clear to anyone who has read Hosea–Zephaniah, derived not from the impotence of Judah’s God but from the power of that God who would no longer tolerate being ignored and dishonored. However, with the passing of seventy years of exile (1:12; 7:5), this God was prepared to take back this people if they repent and demonstrate their commitment to YHWH.

At the instigation of Haggai and Zechariah, the people had repented and begun rebuilding the temple (see Hag 2:15-19; Zech 1:6). Before this change, according to Zechariah 8:10, life had deteriorated on at least two fronts. The land was economically strapped (no wages) and susceptible to chaos because there was no security from surrounding nations or from those intending to do harm within the city. This situation is close to that described in Haggai 1:6—that is, before Haggai’s confrontation with the people and the leaders that led to the start of the building project. Now, according to Zechariah 8:11, the current situation has improved since God’s actions toward “the remnant of this people” are different than before. The changes begin in the present (or at the very least the immediate future, depending on how one understands the chronology of 8:11-12). Seed is being planted in relatively peaceful conditions. The vine produces fruit, the land yields its produce, and the heavens provide moisture for the plants to grow. God provides all of these things for “the remnant of this people” (8:12).

This promise does several things simultaneously. It reverses the judgment announced in the early portions of the Book of the Twelve (see Hos 2:8-9 [MT 2:10-11]; Joel 1–2; Amos 4:7-9). In addition, this situation described in 8:11-12 prepares the way for the expectation of a normal life, which had been threatened earlier in the Book of the Twelve (Amos 5:11; Zeph 1:13) and which begins a new period of promise (see Mic 4:4). The economic situation looks much brighter “now” than when Haggai began.

These anticipated changes, however, do not happen all at once, which explains the language of exhortation (“let your hands be strong”). According to 8:13, the security from surrounding nations will improve in the future. Moreover, the nations’ attitude toward Judah and Israel will change because of those things God will do: “And it will be that just as you have been a curse among the nations, house of Judah and house of Israel, . . . you will be a blessing.” As well, it is significant literarily and theologically that

the promise of 8:13 is directed toward Israel and Judah. Given that these chapters are framed by a question and response given to the delegation from Bethel (see 7:1-3; 8:18-23), this combination seems to convey a promise to restore God's relationship to all people, though by the end of Zechariah this promise is thwarted (see the treatment of Ephraim in Zech 9–11). Subtly, it presupposes the combination of people who have not been united since the time of Rehoboam. Further, the promise that God's people will be a blessing to the nations echoes one of the three cornerstone promises given to Abraham (Gen 12:3). Thus, the changes and the promises in 8:12-13 reverse the situation of 8:10, which describes the "former days" before the foundation of the temple was laid. They imply a return to the beginning: to the beginning of the covenant and to the beginning of the state before the split into two kingdoms.

Zechariah 8:14-17: Judgment in the Past; Call for Truth and Justice in the Present. This unit begins with an introductory messenger formula ("thus says YHWH"), and it ends with a concluding formula ("utterance of YHWH"). These formulaic markers, however, do not mean that these verses have no function within their current context. Rather, 8:14-17 summarizes the message of Zechariah by challenging the current generation to learn from the past.

Zechariah 8:14-15 contrasts YHWH's past decision to punish Judah and Jerusalem on account of their ancestors' provocation (see Zech 1:2-6) with YHWH's decision to act positively on behalf of Jerusalem and Judah (see Zech 1:16-17; 2:4, 10 [MT 2:8, 14]). This contrast follows closely on the theme of the preceding unit (8:9-13) in order to encourage the people of the current generation to look around and see God at work in their midst.

Yet Zechariah 8:16-17 demonstrates that God's decision has implications for the people. God expects people to manifest a consistency between their actions and their words. Consequently, in 8:16-17, God's expectations are laid out in pragmatic terms. YHWH's expectations convey both interpersonal and societal demands that presume the people now desire to please YHWH. Structurally, the verses convey YHWH's ethical demands in a series of four commands that alternately focus on relationships between people and juridical structures. The first two present positive commands while the second two function as their negative

Structure of Zechariah 8:16-17

8:16	These are things you should do:	
	Speak truth to one another	positive, interpersonal
	Judge truth and judgments of peace in your gates	positive, judicial
8:17	Do not take to heart the evil of your neighbor	negative, interpersonal
	You shall not love false oaths	negative, judicial
	These are things I hate.	

counterparts. [Structure of Zechariah 8:16-17] In so doing, the point is made from two directions that truthful dealings with neighbors, combined with true and just court proceedings, please God. In short, truthful behavior is the simple unifying element of these commands.

It is striking that these commands convey expectations for creating healthy relationships between people in the land. One must speak truth and judge fairly; one should not take easy offense at perceived slights from neighbors, nor swear falsely or distort the truth to gain advantage in court. These words challenge the people to consider how their behavior affects society. As well, these words reiterate the basic message of 7:9.

Responses to the Questions of the Samaritan Delegation, 8:18-23

A new word event formula signals the beginning of the final major section of Zechariah 1–8. It is followed by three introductory messenger formulas (8:19, 20, 23) as the larger unit shifts its focus. Functionally, this larger unit serves more than one purpose: it offers a concluding response to the question raised in 7:1-3 and simultaneously deals with one of the themes raised at the beginning of the vision cycle. More specifically, Zechariah 8:19 finally answers the questions raised by the Bethel delegation in 7:1-3 regarding the end of mourning for Jerusalem. As well, the latter two subunits (8:20-22, 23) deal with the restored Judah whose new situation will inspire pilgrims to come to Jerusalem from inside and outside Judah.

Zechariah 8:18-19: The Time for All Mourning Is Past. Zechariah 8:18-19 returns unexpectedly to the question with which this section of Zechariah began. The Samaritan delegation that came to Zechariah (7:1-3) posed a question to the prophet. In essence, the delegation asked whether it was time to cease mourning for

Jerusalem by asking whether the ritual mourning of the fifth month should be continued. For the last seventy years, the fast of the fifth month had lamented the destruction of the temple, but now with the reconstruction of the temple well underway, the necessity of this rite loomed in question.

Curiously, the editor of Zechariah answers this question in peculiar fashion, delaying any direct answer by inserting a large block of interrelated materials (7:4–8:17). Only at the end of chapter 8 does the delegation's question receive a direct response. While the direct response appears unexpectedly, it also flows quite naturally from the ideas in 7:4–8:17. For instance, one of the recurring themes of these chapters has been that a new age dawned when temple reconstruction began. In this new period, God began the process of reconstituting the fertility of the land and removing threats from the surrounding nations. Thus, mourning the temple's destruction no longer carried the same importance as when the temple ruins were all one could see on that once holy spot. With this new age comes the need to look forward. Thus, the prophetic response in 8:19 annuls not only the fast of the fifth month about which the delegation had asked but also all the exilic fasts associated with the events surrounding Jerusalem's destruction: the fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months—each of which recalled disastrous events leading to Babylonian subjugation. In other words, the prophet responds, not just that fast but any period of mourning for Jerusalem's destruction is now over. The temple site has been cleansed, the reconstruction is well underway, and the prophet wants the people to focus on a future where fasts become feasts, where mourning turns to joy. In short, YHWH has returned to Jerusalem and is acting on her behalf. In gratitude, people are called to respond by loving truth and peace. In the end, when the relationship between YHWH and YHWH's people is at its best, that relationship yields truth and peace (see 7:9; 8:16-17).

Zechariah 8:20-22: The Nations Will Come to Judah to Worship. Zechariah 8:20-22 explains the implications of this new age for Jerusalem in even broader terms. The changes for Jerusalem are envisioned in such a way that they will inspire large numbers of people to realize that YHWH has done miraculous things in Jerusalem. Thus, Jerusalem's newfound fame will create a scenario in which people from other cities and countries willingly come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice. This change of reputation taps into

ideas found elsewhere in the prophetic corpus and beyond that, in various ways, portray Jerusalem as the center of God's work with all humanity (Isa 2:1-4; 56:6-7; 62:1-2, 10-12; 66:22-23; Mic 4:2-4; see [Jerusalem as the Center of the World] in Zech 2).

Zechariah 8:23: The Nations Will Find Salvation through the Judeans. Zechariah 8:23 goes even further, providing a perspective that appears infrequently in prophetic literature. Specifically, in contrast to Ezra and Nehemiah, this text expects foreigners ("men from the nations of every language") to be saved by attaching themselves to a Judean. This openness to foreigners has prophetic parallels in Isaiah (56:1-7; 66:22-23) and the Twelve (Jonah; Mal 1:11, 14). Yet this perspective contrasts markedly with the xenophobic attitudes of Ezra 9 toward foreigners. [Openness to the Nations] Rather, this perspective parallels ideas of Israel's task as a light to the nations as presented in Deutero-Isaiah (e.g., Isa 49:6). This perspective does not imply active recruitment of foreign worshipers, but it arises from the conviction that the marvelous works of YHWH in Jerusalem can only inspire the nations to see what God has done. As a result, people will want to learn about this God. These foreigners will want to learn from Judeans because they "have heard that God is with you" (8:23).

Openness to the Nations



The majority of the prophetic material in prophetic literature that deals with foreign nations demonstrates a decidedly negative attitude toward those nations. Every prophetic corpus contains at least one major section dealing with YHWH's judgment against the nations (Isa 13–23; Jer 46–51; Ezek 25–32; and in the Twelve, these attitudes are directed to groups of nations in numerous texts: Joel 3:4-8, 9-17; Amos 1:3–2:3; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zeph 2:4-15; Zech 9:8; 14:1-15). In contrast to this dominant voice, several texts in the Twelve (Zech 8:20-23; Mal 1:11, 14; Zech 14:16-19; Jonah) display a more positive attitude in that they assume the nations will find a home in YHWH's kingdom in some way. These nations-friendly texts do not, however, all exhibit the same attitudes toward the nations. The first of these texts, Zech 8:20-23, anticipates a situation whereby the nations actively seek YHWH in Jerusalem because of its renown as the place of YHWH. Mal 1:11, 14, by contrast, assume YHWH is known and worshiped "among the nations" in a way that contrasts with the way the priests in Jerusalem are worshipping YHWH (cf. Mal 1:9-10, 12-13). Zech 14:16-19 describes an eschatological remnant of the nations after an attack on Jerusalem, a remnant that will subjugate itself to Jerusalem. In this respect, it parallels the remnant of Judah that will be purged according to Zech 13:9, and this attitude represents more of a conquest than a conversion of the nations. Jonah satirizes the prophet, representing Israel, so that while Jonah sleeps, the foreign sailors fear YHWH; while Jonah must be hurled into the sea, the people of Nineveh repent; and when the Ninevites repent, Jonah demonstrably exhibits his anger because YHWH shows compassion. To varying degrees, these texts indicating a positive connection to the nations stand out from the writings to which they belong, but they do not likely all come from the same hand (contra Wöhrle, 400–19, who places several of these texts, along with others, as part of a "grace layer" in the development of the Twelve).

Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW 389; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).

CONNECTIONS

Several points can be made about the implications of these verses. First, much of this material interprets the exile theologically as a

reminder of Judah's rebellion. In the Book of the Twelve and Zechariah 1–8, Judah's situation had deteriorated because God decided that the punishment of his people was the only recourse. Time and again, YHWH had relented from the punishment, but Jerusalem's destruction and the exile of most of its population is portrayed as a necessary action God had to take to get the people to repent. All other efforts had failed.

Theologically, one can question whether God would intervene in human history with this kind of brutality—either against his own people or against foreign nations. Nevertheless, biblical texts consistently present this view. God is a jealous God whose loyalty will not be mocked.

These verses presume YHWH had a purpose in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. YHWH's goal for punishing his people was the salvation of a righteous remnant, not the annihilation of an entire people. Warnings were sent. Reprieves were given. In the end, the biblical prophets portray the people's refusal to return to YHWH, the God to whom they had pledged allegiance. In response, the return from exile and the reconstruction of the temple offered a new beginning. Now the people could show their gratitude to YHWH by upholding their end of the covenant.

Second, at several points, these verses confront the people with a penetrating question: What is the meaning of worship? Does worship start from deep in one's being, or does one worship to manipulate God for selfish reasons? Prophetic texts raise this issue with some regularity, often implying that religious ritual constitutes absurd activity, or even abominable acts, if it is done to impress YHWH. The implicit challenge to the people to evaluate their motives in this unit (7:4-7) even appears rather mild when placed against other texts that challenge the entire purpose of the cult sacrificial system (e.g., Isa 1:10-17) or its inefficacy when one's external actions do not demonstrate genuine responses before God (e.g., Amos 4:4-5; Mic 6:6-8).

Modern communities of faith often assume these challenges refer to someone else. We like to assume that we stand above such confrontations, because the prophets were concerned with animal sacrifice or with festivals that are no longer part of our religious traditions. However, these prophetic admonitions do not focus on ritual practices so much as they highlight the need to approach worship with the proper motivation. Zechariah's words challenge the motivation of people who fast, mourn, and weep. We can sub-

stitute any form of religious expression today. How many times does one hear someone complain that worship “did not move me,” or “I did not get anything out of the worship service”? In prophetic terms, such sayings miss the point of worship. The focus should be on God, not on us.

Third, God is at work in our midst. Perspective is important. Like so many of us, the people to whom this unit was originally addressed struggled with recognizing God’s action on their behalf. This text avows that things began to change when the people turned to God (8:6, 9-13), but the people expected action faster than it came. When one is starving, it is hard to wait for the crops to grow. Consequently, this text exhorts courage in the face of genuine difficulty. Yet it also calls for discernment. When we expect God to act as some kind of magical, mystical wizard, then we miss the equally miraculous changes that are happening all around. When we demand that God act immediately, and in a way of our choosing, then God’s action seems slow and somehow less than we expected. Indeed, God’s presence in the world often requires the eyes of faith to notice new possibilities and changes as they are happening.

Fourth, pleasing God includes acting ethically as individuals and as a society, especially for those who do not have the power to act on their own behalf. When people only look out for their own interests, everyone loses. When getting what I want becomes more important than truth, then anything goes. When a society allows those with means to buy verdicts to suit themselves, then justice becomes perverted. God, however, expects something different. God expects truth and justice to be the goals of those who believe. God expects those who believe to act with integrity, and not to twist the truth to serve their own ends. God expects those who believe to make sure their judicial systems make fair judgments that lead to truth and peace and not only serve to benefit those with wealth and power. When those who believe in God refuse to act in truth, justice is no longer possible. One’s faith life should lead to a longing for justice, truth, and peace.

NOTE

1. Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2000) 2.647.

YHWH DEFENDS THE TERRITORY

Zechariah 9:1-17

With Zechariah 9–11, the material and the message of the book take a noticeable shift. The perspectives become decidedly more eschatological and the tone darker as the subjects of judgment against the nations, the role of the region of Ephraim, the rejection of the leadership, and the battle on the day of YHWH take center stage in Zechariah 9–14. (The distinctive qualities of these chapters compared to 1–8 are discussed in the introduction to Zechariah.)

COMMENTARY

Zechariah 9 divides into four units based on thematic and formal criteria: 9:1-8, 9-10, 11-13, and 14-17. One sees the various units placed here for a rhetorical purpose. They present YHWH clearing the Mediterranean coast (from north to south) in 9:1-8. This cleansing enables YHWH's return to Jerusalem (9:8), which in turn provides Jerusalem reasons to rejoice at the return of her king (9:9-10) and of her exiled inhabitants (9:12). It also explains expectations of a battle with Greece (9:13) and protection from YHWH (9:14-15). The bloody battle mentioned in v. 15 results in the deliverance of the people and leads to a renewal of the land's ability to produce (9:17).

The composite nature of the subunits, however, can be seen in their presuppositions about the fate of Jerusalem. With 9:1-8, the threat Jerusalem faces from Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine is removed. By contrast, 9:13 (and thus the unit 9:11-13) presumes an impending strike against "the sons of Greece" by YHWH using Judah and Ephraim. Also, the north to southwest movement of 9:1-8 does not account for YHWH's arrival from the south in the theophanic description of 9:14. Thus, the rhetorical logic is not linear but episodic, punctuating the chapter with images designed to underscore YHWH's protection of the land as a whole.

YHWH Defends the Borders, 9:1-8

The first unit describes YHWH's defense of the promised land. The rhetorical aim of the passage is to present YHWH's announcement of a reconfiguration of the region. YHWH announces punishment against the regions to the northeast (Syria), northwest (Phoenicia), and west/southwest (Philistia) of Judah in 9:1-7. The result of this north to south movement is nothing short of the return of YHWH to Jerusalem, who as Jerusalem's protector removes the oppressors from Jerusalem and the surrounding territory (9:8).

Zechariah 9:1 begins with the same three words (*massâ' dēbar yhwḥ*) as Zechariah 12:1 and Malachi 1:1, though the syntax of the three headings relates differently to the subsequent messages.¹

[Differences between Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; Malachi 1:1] Together, the repeated phrase in these three texts provides headings over the concluding

Differences between Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; Malachi 1:1



The redactional units marked by the superscriptions in Zech 9:1; 12:1; and Mal 1:1 have been understood as deliberate creations to mark the last three sections of the Book of the Twelve. The phrase "oracle of the word of YHWH" appears only in these three places in the entire Old Testament. Combined with other factors, this phrase has drawn attention to the common editorial shaping. Nevertheless, the three headings are each followed by a different preposition: *bē*, *'al*, and *'el* respectively. These three prepositions mean that each section has a different rhetorical purpose. The first (Zech 9:1) is directed against a foreign nation (*against* Syria; contra C. L. Meyers and E. M. Meyers, who treat the meaning as locative), while most have taken it as an adversative. The second preposition in 12:1 (*'al*) "concerns" Israel, while the third in Mal 1:1 is directed "to" (*'el*) Israel *through* Malachi.

See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 92–93; and David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 41.

sections of the Book of the Twelve. This repetition is largely considered a sign of the end stages of redaction of the Book of the Twelve. Scholars disagree, however, over the precise way these headings entered into the corpus. Some argue (or presume) that Malachi 1:1 was the original heading when Malachi was added to Haggai–Zechariah 1–8, and that subsequent editors added the headings to Zechariah 9:1 and 12:1 in order to imitate the heading of Malachi 1:1.² Still, the syntactical relationship of the title to the three contexts is not identical.³ The title in 9:1 leads directly into the oracle.

The first portion of 9:1-8 moves quickly from judgment on Syria (9:1-2) to judgment on Phoenicia (9:2-4). The focus on Syria, called "Aram," highlights two regions in particular from the land northeast of Israel: Hadrach and Damascus. The northernmost region listed in Zechariah 9, Hadrach represents a northern district of Syria created in the late eighth century. It

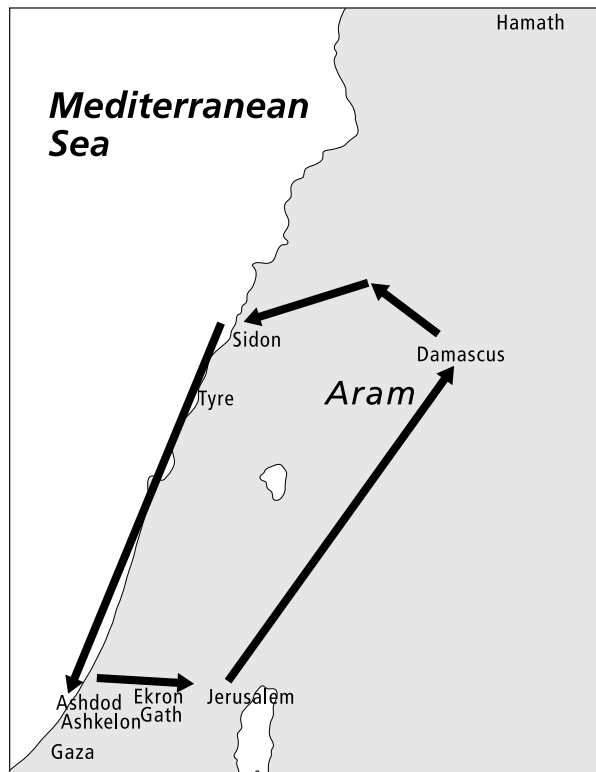
is also the name of a city in the region (presumably a major city). Since the city of Damascus was the capital of Syria, this reference syntactically implies the region as a whole, with *'ereṣ* (land of) modifying both Hadrach and Damascus.

Zechariah 9:2 mentions Hamath, Tyre, and Sidon. Hamath is the boundary between Israel's ideal borders to the north and Syria's border to the northeast. Tyre and Sidon, on the other hand, are major Phoenician cities located on the Mediterranean coast. The emphasis in 9:2-4 is on Tyre. Economically, however, Sidon was the more important city. The emphasis on Tyre can be explained by two issues. First, traditionally, Tyre plays a bigger role in the history of Judah/Israel. Second, Tyre is closer to Israel and Judah. The parallelism of 9:3 focuses on the destruction of Tyre's economic advantage by relating the city's fortress to its silver and gold.

Several commentators have noted the influence of the oracles against the nations (OAN) from Amos on the formulation at the end of 9:4. Comparing the OAN in Amos and this passage, however, demonstrates a different agenda for the Zechariah passage. In Amos, the OAN leads to judgment against Judah and Israel. In Zechariah 9:1-8, the surrounding nations are judged,

but the ultimate goal of the judgment is to prepare peace for Jerusalem. The only accusation brought against any of the nations is the pride of Tyre in its wealth (9:3-4). Unlike Amos 1-2, which condemns specific crimes of the nations, Zechariah condemns the nations in broad strokes. In this respect, Zechariah 9:1-8 is closer to Joel 3:1-21 than Amos 1-2. Joel 3:1-21 (MT 4:1-21) denounces specific crimes of Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia in 3:4-8 (MT 4:4-8) and also calls "all nations" (3:9) and "all the nations round about" (3:11) to eschatological judgment. Thus, Joel 3:1-21 appears to reframe the implications of Amos 1-2 as an eschatological event.⁴

Map of Places in Zechariah 9



The places mentioned in Zech 9:1-8 essentially depict YHWH's defense of the land. Assuming that YHWH begins from Jerusalem, YHWH moves up through Syria, then down along the coast through Phoenicia (Tyre and Sidon) and then Philistia (Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod) before returning to Jerusalem (9:8). The poetic scene thus conveys YHWH's aggressive actions as defensive maneuvers to shield the land from outside invasion by encircling the land.

Zechariah 9:1-8 also envisions an eschatological purpose: restoration of peace for Jerusalem so that its king may return (see 9:9-10).

With Zechariah 9:5-7, the focus shifts to Philistia. Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and Ashdod represent four of the five cities of the Philistine pentapolis. Gath is not mentioned, perhaps because it belonged to Judah during this period.⁵ At any rate, the emphasis appears to be placed on Ekron in 9:5, if Meyers and Meyers are correct. The double, chiastically recurring appearance of Ashkelon/Gaza Gaza/Ashkelon frames the mention of Ekron. On the other hand, the fact that this pattern breaks down with the mention of Ashdod in 9:6a should caution against over-interpreting the chiasm, especially since the pattern of the names actually becomes A-B-C-B-A-D if one maintains the close connection between these verses. One could equally argue for a double triad (A-B-C/B-A-D), which could represent the totality of destruction of Philistia and which in turn anticipates the final line of 9:6 ("I will make an end of the pride of Philistia").

The relationship of Judah, Ekron, and the Jebusites in 9:7 presents an interesting picture. Zechariah 9:6b announces the end of the pride of Philistia, meaning Philistia will come under Judah's control ("it will be like a clan in Judah"). The comparison of Ekron to the Jebusites plays on ancient traditions of the Davidic monarchy. Originally, "Jebus" was the Canaanite name for Jerusalem, and the Jebusites were the inhabitants of Jerusalem when David captured the city (2 Sam 5:6-10). The implications for 9:7, then, are that Ekron will become the central city of a transformed Philistine territory, one that now becomes part of YHWH's territorial lands.

This first unit culminates in 9:8, which sheds light on the ultimate goal of YHWH's actions in 9:1-7. Zechariah 9:8 conveys an image of YHWH encamping "at my house" as a defender against attack. The reference to YHWH's house (9:8) does double duty. On the one hand, it evokes the image of the temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, one must also keep the entire passage in view poetically, so that "house" here also refers to the entire territory of Judah. YHWH has cleared the borders of the land from north to south in 9:1-7. (See "Map of Places in Zechariah 9.") YHWH will now guard the territory, keeping out the invading armies who fought for control over the eastern Mediterranean coastlands for much of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Persians controlled


this land from the sixth to the fourth century, but Greece eventually took it when Alexander defeated Persia in 332, and Egypt wanted the Persians out of the region. The defensive shield established by YHWH in 9:1-7 effectively blocks the entire region from these warring parties, with the purpose of defending Judah.

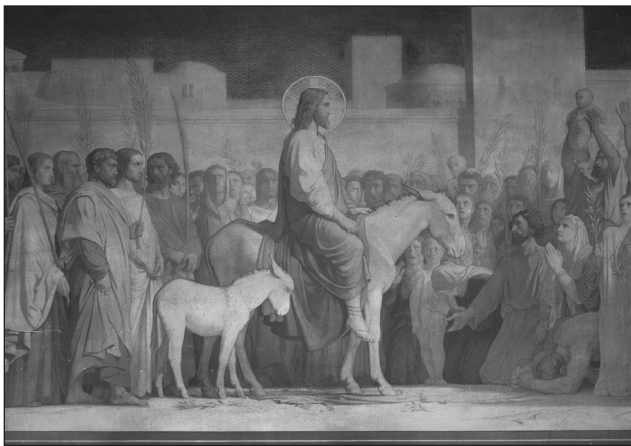
The King Comes to Jerusalem in Peace, 9:9-10

The second unit, 9:9-10, takes the dramatic reconfiguration of power in 9:1-8 a step farther. First, Lady Zion (Jerusalem personified) is commanded to rejoice. One might initially assume that the reason for rejoicing could be the removal of the oppressors (implied by 9:1-8), but the second half of 9:9 presents another reason: the arrival of a king in Jerusalem. The imagery depicts a royal figure entering the city, presumably for a coronation, but the triumphant king comes in peace, not at the head of an army. In other words, the king arrives, but without any militaristic overtones. This image makes sense not only because of Judah's social situation in the postexilic period but also because of the logic of 9:1-8. To begin with, the social setting of Judah as a Persian province makes the desire for a king understandable but also problematic. The idea that Judah could defeat Persia or Greece, both powerful military entities, would be hard to envision. Yet just such a defeat is what would be necessary for the rise of a Judean king. However, the context of 9:1-8 makes it possible for a king to come in peace since YHWH has essentially eliminated the need for a battle by clearing the path for the king's return.

Zechariah 9:9 uses a different verb to express a similar command as in Zephaniah 3:14 ("Rejoice, Lady Zion"), and the constellation is different. Zephaniah 3:14 anticipates YHWH as the king who will enter Jerusalem, but Zechariah 9:9-10 implies that there will be a human king. Multiple images convey a sense of both royalty and humility. Zechariah 9:9 uses synonymous parallelism across two lines to portray the king riding on a single animal, described twice to highlight its humility. This parallelism created confusion for the LXX and New Testament understandings of the verse. [\[Zechariah 9:9 and Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem\]](#) Nevertheless, the use of the donkey deliberately downplays any militaristic intentions of this royal figure. Thus, the New Testament applies this humility motif appropriately for the royal figure when adapting Zechariah 9:9 to

Zechariah 9:9 and Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem

 The picture, painted in the nineteenth century by Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin (1809–1864), demonstrates how the donkey in Zech 9:9 was frequently misunderstood as two different animals. The LXX translates this verse as referring to a donkey and a young colt rather than using terms for a male and female donkey: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, the King is coming to you, just, and a savior; he is meek and riding on an ass, and a young colt.” The NT then adds to the confusion when it cites this verse as a prediction of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Both Matt 21:2-7 and John 12:14-15 cite Zech 9:9, but Matthew appears to follow the confusion of the LXX by having Jesus retrieve two animals, thus missing the parallelism: “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me [. . .] This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey’” (Matt 21:2, 4-5). John streamlines the citation of Zech 9:9 to eliminate the parallelism, and thus the confusion regarding the number of animals: “Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’” (John 12:14-15). Like many artists through the ages, Flandrin follows the Matthean account and interprets the parallelism to refer to a second, younger animal, “the foal of a colt” instead of the understanding the Hebrew “the foal of a donkey” as a parallel term emphasizing the humility of the one animal.



Hippolyte Flandrin (1809–1864). *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*. Chapel of the Virgin, St. Germain des Pres, Paris, France. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

the life of Jesus, even though it misunderstands the parallelism.

Zechariah 9:10 calls for peace for Ephraim and Jerusalem as part of a king's universal rule. The imagery does several things. First, it connects the fate of Ephraim and Jerusalem under one ruler. This combination means that the fate of the northern kingdom (Ephraim) and southern kingdom (Jerusalem) will be shared. Second, the imagery suggests this king's dominion is the cause of the peace. To be sure, the description reflects coronation language of the ancient Near East, but it also implies the expectation on someone's behalf that the new king will control the territory. Consequently, this image—presumably composed in the Persian period or the early Hellenistic period—seems to convey someone's expectations that a new Davidic king would somehow control territory in the land again. Third, the imagery of the humble king entering Jerusalem from 9:9 belies the power at this king's

disposal in 9:10. The assumption of a king riding a donkey who can command nations reflects two different attitudes about the king: one of humility and one of power. These two are not incompatible, but they certainly are juxtaposed in this context. Fourth, the connecting logic between this humility and power lies in the

assumptions from what has preceded the king's arrival. YHWH has cleared the land before the arrival of the king. In short, the king, then, rules at YHWH's behest, and he could not command the nations if YHWH had not put him in charge.

Battling the Greeks, 9:11-13

The third unit, 9:11-13, continues the second feminine singular address to Lady Zion, but it also commands Judah/Ephraim to return (using second masculine plural). The command to rejoice presumes the previous verses in which YHWH has announced his intention to protect Jerusalem. Zechariah 9:11-13 promises Zion the return of those who have been exiled. The metaphors for the exiles are telling. First, the anticipated action comes because of the "covenant" between YHWH and Lady Zion. Ezekiel 16 is the only other passage in which blood and covenant appear with Lady Zion as the covenantal partner. Second, the imagery of prisoners in a waterless pit (9:11b)—in this context—refers to those taken from Lady Zion. This text is generally interpreted as reflecting a period after the initial returnees arrived, thus testifying to the mindset of those who came back. The restoration of Zion to its preexilic size took centuries, leaving an impression in much of the postexilic literature of incomplete restoration. Third, the promise to restore double (9:12) is reminiscent of the promise in Isaiah 40:2 (though the wording is not identical). Fourth, the prisoners are called to return to the "stronghold," a metaphor for Zion that uses a Hebrew word whose pronunciation (*ṣârôn*) evokes connections to Zion (*ṣîyôn*), as does the context in general. Thus, the verse expects these prisoners to return to Jerusalem.⁶ Finally, the warrior YHWH announces he will use Judah and Ephraim as a weapon against Greece.

This verse—especially in light of the emphasis on Tyre at the beginning of the chapter—has functioned since the late nineteenth century as the primary text for dating Zechariah 9–14 to the early Hellenistic period. Recent scholarship, however, especially among American scholars, has focused on the increasing hostility between Persia and Greece from the fifth century onward to argue that the verse need not be interpreted as arising so late. Yet these investigations largely ignore the lack of reference to Persia in this context. While Zechariah 9:13 assumes Greece to be the enemy of Judah

and Ephraim, it contains no reference to Persia. Moreover, while there is ample evidence of Greek involvement in the region, economically and politically, none of these sources provides clear indication of animosity between Greece and Judah/Ephraim that would lead to the kind of military confrontation presumed in 9:13 until the time of Alexander.

Meyers and Meyers make a strong case that the verbs in 9:13 represent idioms for the technical terms of “bending” and “filling” the “bow.”⁷ The use of *drk* (tread) implies stepping on the bow (*qešet*) to pull it down and attach the string, while *ml* (filling) the bow means to pull it back with the arrow already attached. Thus “bow” does double duty, since *qešet* never means “arrow” (despite its addition in the NRSV). It is now widely recognized that Greece was a pivotal power who from the mid-fifth century was at odds with Persia over the eastern Mediterranean seaboard. In the mid-fifth century, the Persians built fortresses along the Mediterranean trade routes as a result of threats from Greece. Nevertheless, the military nature of the threat in 9:13 makes Greece the primary threat.

Battle Leads to Victory, 9:14-17

The final unit of the chapter, 9:14-17, returns to a descriptive focus on YHWH. Unlike the preceding verses where YHWH speaks in the first person (specifically 9:6-13), 9:14-17 refers to YHWH in the third person. It does not utilize first person speech. The unit begins with a theophanic description of YHWH’s protective presence above the army (of Judah and Ephraim). This presence comes from the south, literally in the “whirlwinds of Teman.” This language evokes traditions like those in Habakkuk 3, where YHWH comes from Teman as warrior to retake the land (Hab 3:3). As such, Zechariah 9:14-17 exhibits different assumptions than those of Zechariah 9:1-7, where YHWH made his way down the Mediterranean coast from north to south. Teman, by contrast, refers to the southeast region toward what had historically been Edom, not toward Philistia (southwest). While one can postulate a certain logic of placement, 9:14-17 most likely had a different origin than 9:1-8, as evidenced by the change of direction and speaker.

The battle scene unfolds in 9:14. YHWH is armed with an arrow described like lightning (see Hab 3:4), and he advances at the blowing of the battle horn. The army then overruns the enemy, a

bloody scene that 9:15 describes quite graphically. Zephaniah 9:15 continues to refer to the exiles whom YHWH will protect, but they also represent part of YHWH's army. They too will battle the enemies of YHWH. The gruesome imagery of these warriors indulging in the bloody defeat of the enemies should be understood figuratively. Literal drinking of blood would have been anathema to those in Judah, but the imagery constitutes a powerful and provocative portrait of total victory. In short, while YHWH is portrayed as protector, the actual battle, it is assumed, will be fought by those returning.

Zechariah 9:16-17 focuses on the people whom YHWH delivers. The victorious battle described in 9:14-15 has prepared the land for its return to a state of fertility. Consequently, the next metaphors for the people should come as no surprise. The prisoners/exiles who returned in victorious battle are now described as both the flock of YHWH and the decorative stones of YHWH's royal crown (9:16). First, the flock metaphor stresses YHWH's protection. YHWH, like a good shepherd, saves the flock from enemies. The second half of the verse describes these exiles as jewels dotting the landscape. As they fill the land, they will sparkle. The image here obliquely evokes YHWH's royal character by reference to the crown and its jewels, but the crown functions metaphorically as the land wherein the jewels shine. The stones shine on the land (9:16) and lead to a promise of grain and new wine (9:17) for the sustenance of this people. In 9:17, one finds beauty and goodness ascribed to YHWH, while the produce of the land will make the people healthy. Here, as elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve, grain and wine function within promises of fertility to show YHWH's pleasure and displeasure with the people.

CONNECTIONS

Zechariah 9 focuses on two interrelated themes: YHWH's protection of YHWH's land and the arrival of Judah's peaceful king. The two themes are interrelated because the former prepares for the latter. In this chapter, the bulk of the material focuses on YHWH's shield-like trek from the northeast to the southwest to the east as an affirmation of YHWH's intention to create a peaceful land where Judah can rest. The peaceful imagery contrasts markedly

with the reality of the latter part of the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. The picture emerging from historical studies of the Persian period largely demonstrates that, despite the continuity of Persian control of Palestine, animosity between the Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Phoenicians made the territory west of Judah somewhat of a powder keg politically and militarily. Against this backdrop of an ever-present possibility of military skirmishes, Zechariah 9 articulates an affirmation of YHWH's providential care for Judah.

For this reason, Zechariah 9:9-10 also anticipates the return of a Davidic king to rule the territory. This promise represents one of at least five such texts in the Book of the Twelve (see also Hos 1:11; Amos 9:11-12; Mic 5:2-3; Hag 2:20-23). To be sure, these texts each bring something unique to the promise they offer. The first two texts, for example, anticipate the reunification of the southern and northern kingdoms, while the third anticipates a future Davidic ruler coming from Bethlehem. The fourth text avoids the term "king" but mentions the grandson of Jehoiachin by name and associates Zerubbabel (who was probably born in Babylon) with the violent overthrow of the nations. Finally, Zechariah 9:9-10 reverses this aggressive image of the future king in favor of a peaceful royal reentry into Jerusalem after YHWH has established peace in the land. These two motifs, divine providence and Davidic kingship, combine in Zechariah 9 to offer a promise of peace that awaits Judah in the future.

Tradition history begins to play a role in such promises. These and other promises that David will be restored to the throne, and/or that the borders of the Davidic kingdom will be restored, become embedded in Judah's postexilic texts. Thus, despite the fact that Judah was under Persian hegemony for 200 years, followed by another century and a half of Hellenistic rule, these promises remained as part of Judah's developing canon. Because these promises were passed down in literature that increasingly claimed canonical status, it became inevitable, or nearly so, that in times of political turmoil and oppression certain readers would be moved by the hope these texts offer. This expectation took different forms among different groups at different times, but the majority of these groups probably anticipated this new Davidic figure would play a prominent political, if not military, role. Certainly, such was the case among the Zealots and other first-century groups who

expected to restore the Davidic kingdom. True, not every branch of Judaism emphasized a coming messiah, but in Jesus' day the Roman occupation of Judea fueled the promulgation of such expectations. These groups trusted in the promises of a coming messiah and hoped the promises would be fulfilled in their lifetime. Some followers of John the Baptist hoped John would be the one to restore the kingdom. Within this context, many undoubtedly began to hope Jesus would do the same.

Jesus, after all, spoke of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God as being "at hand." Consequently, it is no wonder that Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospel traditions, goes to considerable lengths to clarify the nature of the kingdom of which he speaks. From the Sermon on the Mount to the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus portrays the kingdom of God not as a political empire to be taken but as a spiritual force that laid claim upon the actions of its adherents. Thus, it is no accident that the Gospels draw on Zechariah 9:9-10 to present the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as the entry of the peaceful king riding on a donkey. Jesus' kingdom, according to the Gospels, would not be taken by sword and would not be kept in place by earthly power and oppression. The laws of Jesus' kingdom uphold the meek and the peacemakers. They inspire the merciful and the pure in heart. The frequency and consistency with which Jesus eschewed violence and condoned benevolence gets overlooked, often by those in the church who loudly and publicly profess to be his followers. Whether through fear or animosity, history has shown that too frequently the Christian church would feel safer if Jesus drove a tank rather than a donkey. Jesus, however, taught differently.

NOTES

1. See James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 187–89, 217–19.

2. Crucial to these arguments are the following facts: (1) Mal 1:1 is the only one of the three headings to include a named prophet; (2) the formulation "through" (lit., "by the hand of") Malachi seems to imitate Haggai's use of that prepositional phrase; and (3) Malachi contains quite a number of phrases that appear in Zech 8. (See David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* [OTL; Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 1995] 165–66; Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*, 187–89.)

3. See the notes in David Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 41–42, 110–11, 165–66.

4. See Aaron Schart, "The First Section of the Book of the Twelve Prophets: Hosea–Joel–Amos," *Int* 61 (2007): 144–46.

5. See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 104–105.

6. See Meyers and Meyers, 142–43.

7. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 145–46. See also Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14*, 55; and Shalom Paul, "A Technical Expression from Archery in Zechariah 9:13a," *VT* 39 (1989): 495–97.

RECONSTITUTING JUDAH AND ISRAEL

Zechariah 10:1–11:3

Zechariah 10:1–11:3 contains a series of four units (10:1-2, 3-6, 7-12, and 11:1-3), which are both independent and interdependent since the current placement of each unit builds on an image from the end of the previous unit. Hence, the language of fertility for the land that concluded 9:17 leads to a request for rain in 10:1-2; the reference to the lack of a shepherd in 10:2 connects with the anger against the shepherds in 10:3; the topic of the deliverance of Joseph at the end of 10:6 joins with the promise to the people of Ephraim in 10:7; and the promise of strength for the exiles of the northern kingdom (10:12) intersects with the image of regaining lost territory in 11:1-3. As well, the placement of these units creates a logical progression from the implicit fertility promise of 10:1-2 to the promise of restoration of the Davidic kingdom. In this respect, the generally positive tenor of 10:1–11:3 contrasts markedly with the rhetorical unit that follows (11:4-17), which speaks of the dissolution of that kingdom.

COMMENTARY

Petition for Rain, 10:1-2

Zechariah 10:1-2 commands the people to ask for rain from YHWH, not from false idols that cannot provide it. Consequently, it implicitly admonishes the people to turn from false practices to the one who can actually do something for them. While this command starts a new subunit, its placement demonstrates cognizance of the promise of grain and wine that ends 9:17. Thus, while 9:17 expresses a future promise, 10:1 commands the people to do something (i.e., petition YHWH) that will enable that future to come to fruition.

The rain imagery with which this passage opens covers the entire rain cycle from the thunderstorms of October to the sporadic rains of

Teraphîm

AΩ The term *teraphîm* refers to (usually) small statues of human forms, the function of which is still debated. Most likely, these forms either represent (1) deities or (2) ancestral figures to whom petitions are offered. The consultation of *teraphîm* is typically condemned in Deuteronomistic literature, but the figurines are widespread enough in archaeological finds to suggest that the practice was quite common, at least through the seventh century BCE. There also appears to have been a continuation of these practices among the Diaspora. (See Karel van der Toorn, “The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 203–22.)



Three Astarte figurines, supporting their breasts with hands. From Judah. Terracotta, Pillar-type (1000–700 BCE). Iron Age. Israel Museum (IDAM), Jerusalem, Israel. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

the spring. In the agricultural cycle, the delay of rain by even a couple weeks can have dramatic consequences for that growing cycle. The rain cycle begins with the hard rains in October, followed by sporadic rain from November–March and then by the late spring rains in April/May. The petition assumes that YHWH controls the rain, so YHWH should be the one to whom the people turn, but the rhetoric that follows implies the people are not acting in ways consistent with that assumption.

Zechariah 10:2 condemns the consultation of *teraphîm* (however they functioned), diviners, and dream interpreters. [*Teraphîm*] The polemic implies that these acts were being practiced but were not adequate as a means to YHWH. Rhetorically, the implied behavior here contrasts with the request for rain from YHWH in the previous verse since YHWH is the one who controls the weather. The consultation of *teraphîm*, diviners, and dreamers indicates a lack of leadership who would remind the people that YHWH was the one to whom they should turn.¹

Failure of Leaders and Hope for the Kingdom, 10:3-6

Zechariah 10:3-6 expresses YHWH's displeasure with the leadership of Judah (shepherds and goats), but YHWH's concern for the flock—labeled here as the house of Judah—means Judah will become the center of a restored kingdom, defeating enemies (10:5), and providing leaders (cornerstone, tent peg) and the army (battle bow) in the coming battle (10:4). By combining references to the house of Judah and Joseph, Zechariah 10:6 expands the perspective and transitions to the region traditionally associated with the northern kingdom. Moreover, the move to the northern kingdom anticipates the focus of 10:7-12, where restoration of Ephraim is the central

subject. The promise of 10:3-6 thus both admonishes the leadership and encourages the restoration of Judah (and Israel).

Zechariah 10:3 not only expresses YHWH's anger with the leadership of the people (shepherds and goats) but also reflects YHWH's desire to see Judah prosper. Source critically, the overlap of the shepherd imagery from 10:2 to 10:3 accounts for the placement of this unit, but 10:3-6 does not reflect the same inherent setting as 10:1-2. Zechariah 10:1-2 concerns the proper response to an agricultural need, while 10:3-6 speaks of strengthening the house of Judah in military terms. Whereas 10:1-2 bemoans the absence of leadership, 10:3 condemns the acts of two groups of leaders, shepherds and goats. Because the word "goat" is used elsewhere in parallel to "king" (see Isa 14:9), both the NRSV and the NIV paraphrase the word "goats" as "leaders." The metaphorical terminology here, though, appears to be a derisive term referring to the chief male goats that represent leaders who arise from within the flock.² Meyers and Meyers consider the context and the metaphors in making this comparison. They reason that the context speaks of the exiled community by use of the divine warrior terminology (10:3b) and the concern for the restoration of the land in 10:6, 8-11. Further, they argue that the leadership emerges from the flock rather than being appointed. They connect the metaphor of he-goats to Isaiah 14:9 and Jeremiah 50:8, passages that interpret the Babylonian exile. In other words, this group represents a second tier of leadership. In this case, the "goats" refer to leaders of Babylonian exiles who resist the call to return to the land. These leaders not only work against the goals of the shepherd but also put the flock at risk.

The second half of 10:3 changes the theme from punishment of the leadership to restoration of the flock. YHWH "cares for" the flock. This verb is the same one translated as "punish" (*pdq*) in the first part of the verse, but the lack of a preposition (*l*) creates a different idiom. The second use of *pdq* thus has positive connotations. Also, the imagery of the flock (a passive collection of sheep) that becomes YHWH's battle horse represents a powerful shift in tone.

The next two verses (10:4-5) poetically describe an eschatological army whose leadership and heroes come from Judah. This army will become the instrument by which YHWH defeats the enemy, notably one known for its cavalry. The rapid rise of cavalry forces as a major factor in warfare can be seen in the Hellenistic and Persian

Cornerstone and Tent Peg

Meyers and Meyers document the intricate messianic associations of “cornerstone” and “tent peg.” The association of these terms, however, is with the expectation of a Davidic king who will rise up to lead the people. The cornerstone draws on metaphorical language to convey essential support of Davidic leadership (Ps 118:22), and the tent peg draws on intertextual connections that convey similar ideas (Isa 22:23–25; Ezra 9:8–9). For further development of these ideas in the context of postexilic Judah, see Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 200–202.

armies.³ The description of the leadership uses metaphors of strength and stability (tent peg and cornerstone), metaphors that also have messianic overtones. [Cornerstone and Tent Peg] Verse 5 describes the actions of the army in battle with idioms used elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve: trampling the enemy into the mud (see Mic 7:10; Nah 3:14; Zech 9:4) and confusing the horsemen (see Hag 2:22).

Zechariah 10:6 both concludes this segment of the chapter, which focuses on Judah (10:2–5), and prepares the reader for the next focal point (Joseph/Ephraim) in 10:7–12. This dual focus

on Judah/Ephraim appeared in 9:13, where it also represented a positive combination (as in most of Zech 10). Nevertheless, this dual focus will be the subject of negative statements in chapter 11 (see especially 11:14 and the staff called “Unity”).

The Return of Ephraim, 10:7–12

Zechariah 10:7–12 does several things. First, it parallels the restoration of Judah (10:3–6) with the restoration of Ephraim (the northern kingdom). The ends of both units use identical expressions for the fate of the two regions: whereas 10:6 parallels the unusual form of “strengthen” (using *gbr* as a verb) for Judah, 10:12 uses this term for Ephraim. Second, using allusions, it draws on other traditions for images of restoration, as will be demonstrated below. In short, this passage offers restoration to Ephraim, which essentially makes a place for the former northern kingdom in the vision of the future. In this respect, the basic theme of Zechariah 10 coincides well with promises elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve (see the literary frame of Zech 7:1–3; 8:18–19; and the promise language added to Hos 1:7, 11; Amos 9:11–15; and Obad 18–21) that presume a restored kingdom. Specific language of a *Davidic* king is muted in comparison with the texts from Hosea and Amos, but the surrounding context presumes boundaries for the land and Jerusalem as the center of the kingdom. For this reason, one can assume that the model of the ideal kingdom in Zechariah 10 is roughly equivalent to the Davidic kingdom.

Ephraim becomes the central focus from 10:7 to the end of the chapter. Ephraim was the central focus of Hosea and Amos, where it was often used as a shorthand term for the entire northern kingdom. Named for one of the two sons of Joseph, this tribal region was the population center and agricultural core of the former northern kingdom. It contained the capital, Samaria, and the major cultic site of Bethel.

The comparison of Ephraim to “warriors” in 10:7 is more pointed than one might suspect from the NRSV. The term “warriors” translates *gibbôr* and, in contexts where *gibbôr* appears, victory in battle is assumed. The verse also displays a keen sense of parallelism and deliberately plays on Hosea 9:1–4. Meyers and Meyers note that the repetition of the root “make glad” and the word “their heart” in just three lines results in an artistic structural movement of poetic imagery that emphasizes Ephraim’s joyous response.⁴

Then the people of Ephraim shall become like warriors,
and *their hearts (libbâm) shall be glad (šâmḥû)* as with wine.
Their children shall see it and *be glad (šâmḥû)*,
Their hearts (libbâm) shall exult in the LORD.

The use of wine as a simile for the response of Ephraim presupposes an image of celebration, partying, often associated with festivals in which wine is readily available and raucous behavior is clearly evident. Such positive use of wine as a symbol appears elsewhere (e.g., Neh 8:9–12; see Esth 1; Eccl 10:19), but Meyers and Meyers correctly note that Zechariah 10:7 deliberately alludes to and reverses Hosea 9:1, 4.⁵ [Zechariah 10:7–12 and Hosea 9:14]

Zechariah 10:8 calls for the return of the exiles from Ephraim.

The word translated as “signal” in the NRSV means whistle. This action on the part of YHWH leads several to picture YHWH as the shepherd calling the sheep to return. The metaphor thus assumes YHWH as shepherd from the preceding section on Judah (10:3). Next, Zechariah 10:9 promises a return for the exiles of Ephraim.

Zechariah 10:7–12 and Hosea 9:14



Hos 9:1–4 presumes the agricultural process as a backdrop to pronounce judgment, whereas Zech 10:7–12 utilizes this backdrop to relay promises.

Hos 9:1–4

9:1: Do not exult (*šmḥ*)
9:2, 4: No wine for Ephraim
9:3: Ephraim will go to Egypt
and Assyria

Zech 10:7–12

10:7: Exult (*šmḥ*)
10:7: Ephraim will exult like
wine
10:10: Ephraim returns from
Egypt and Assyria

Thus, the signal is first sent (10:8) and then received (10:9), leading into the return from exile in 10:10.

Zechariah's portrayal of the return from exile deliberately alludes to Hosea, where the expectation of deportation to Egypt *and* Assyria appears quite prominently in Hosea 7–14 (see 7:11; 9:3, 6; 11:5, 11; 12:1; 14:3 [MT 14:4]). The formulaic language here creates problems for dating Zechariah 9–14, since the evidence can be interpreted as indicative of conflicts either in the mid-fifth century or the latter third of the fourth century. [Problems Dating Zechariah 9–14] At any rate, the return of exiles from Egypt and Assyria simultaneously leads to the repopulation of Gilead and Lebanon (10:10) and the loss of stature for Assyria and Egypt (10:11), all the while strengthening the identity of the Ephraimites as YHWH worshipers (10:12).

One finds in Zechariah 10:10 two regions of deportation and flight combined with two regions lost to foreign occupation in the eighth century. Assyria and Egypt serve as a merism for the places to which the northern tribes were scattered, either involuntarily by deportation or “voluntarily” by fleeing to escape Assyrian occupation (see [Merism] in Zech 8). Gilead and Lebanon are also chosen for similar reasons. These two areas represent portions of the ideal

Problems Dating Zechariah 9–14



Recently, commentators, such as Meyers and Meyers, have explored whether Zech 10 can be reliably dated to the mid-fifth century. The wars between Persians and Greeks escalated in response to the Egyptian revolt that began in 464 BCE. These commentators argue that these events form the backdrop against which one should read much of Zech 9–14. While this suggestion has merits, it requires several things to be convincing. First, because of the dependence on other texts such as Isa 56–66 and Joel, dating Zech 9–14 to the fifth century requires dating several other texts earlier than was typical for scholarship some decades ago. Second, while the case can be made that the Egyptian revolt created instability in the mid-fifth century, neither Persia nor Egypt is mentioned specifically as an enemy in this context. By contrast, Zech 9:13 specifies Greece as the one who will be defeated by YHWH's use of Judah and Ephraim. To be sure, Greece played an important supporting role in this rebellion, but not one that would explain the omission of Egypt. The downfall of Egypt and Assyria does receive attention in 10:11, but not because they pose a direct threat to the prophet. By contrast, Alexander's conquest

of the region a century later did not involve Egypt as a major player, and Egypt's omission from the list at that point would not be as surprising. Third, it would appear that Persia is a nonentity in Zech 9–14. Most who date these chapters to the fifth century attribute the omission of Persia as a tip of the hat to its power and/or to the emergence of a proto-apocalyptic perspective that hid the identity of the real enemy by using figurative language (see Meyers and Meyers, 21). The problem here is that the text is silent about Persia. There are no coded allusions to the need to overthrow Persia. This deficit suggests that the group responsible for Zech 9–14 was either satisfied with Persian political rule or that Persia was gone from the scene. If the former, then the omission of Egypt in the fifth century would be even more surprising, since Egypt's rebellion (not the participation of Greece) would be responsible for the problem. Until such time that these issues can be more adequately explained, it remains unlikely that a clear consensus will be achieved in dating Zech 9–14 to the fifth or fourth century.

Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993).

kingdom of Israel, but this territory (along with Bashan, see 11:1-3) was lost, conquered by Assyria at the end of the eighth century. Geographically, Gilead constituted territory to the east of the Jordan River in the former northern kingdom, while Lebanon represented the northern borders of ideal Israel.

Zechariah 10:11 adapts traditional language for the exiles/diaspora by drawing on two images: the exodus tradition and the chaos battle. The chaos battle reflects a story noted in several variations where the hero-deity defeats the forces of chaos in a war of cosmic significance. (See “Baal Worship” in Hos 2 and the commentary on Hab 3.) Specifically, the sea and the river represent two of the deities fighting for chaos who are defeated. The exodus tradition is poetically depicted as an analogy to this battle, especially as noted in the so-called Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, where the forces of pharaoh are portrayed in terms similar to the forces of chaos. Zechariah 10:12 concludes the unit with a statement of Ephraimite piety by drawing a clear parallel to the restoration of Judah that concluded the previous unit (using the same verb as in 10:6). Thus, 10:7-12 offers a strong message of hope for Ephraim, the descendants of the northern kingdom.

Retaking Lost Territory, 11:1-3

The presence of 11:1-3 functions inherently as a warning to Lebanon and Bashan that its territory will be retaken. It is doubtful that the unit was originally composed for 10:7-12. Its placement represents a prophetic warning and implies the imminent fulfillment of the return of the exiles when placed alongside 10:7-12. The literary parameters are not difficult to recognize given that 11:1 opens with a command to a new addressee, whereas 11:4 begins a narrative that functions as an extended report of a symbolic action.

Contextually, 11:1-3 furthers the promise in the preceding unit that the northern exiles will return. Not only are those exiles promised they will return but they are also now assured of occupying the regions of Lebanon and Gilead. (Bashan is adjacent to Gilead in the Transjordan.) The reason for placing 11:1-3 here is not difficult to recognize. The exiles will return to Lebanon and Gilead because the cedar and the cypress have fallen. These cedar and cypress trees are metaphors for the superpowers, as with Ezekiel 17 and Judges

9. Thus, this language envisions the downfall of the major powers, presenting an opening for a return of the former population.

Structurally and thematically, Zechariah 11:1-3 presents a coherent unit whose position presupposes pronouncements concerning the return of exiles from the northern kingdom, but whose content focuses on devastation to Lebanon and Bashan. This unit contains five similarly structured poetic lines. The first half of each line deals with a reaction to the deforestation of a region, while the second half offers a rationale. The first three lines (11:1-2) represent commands to lament addressed to Lebanon and to two trees personified. The last two lines address the reaction of two groups (shepherds, lions). Each line adds a new dimension to the devastation.

First, Lebanon is commanded to open its doors because fire will devour its cedars (the basis of its economic viability). This destruction of the cedars in 11:1 immediately gives way to the command to lament addressed to the cypress and oaks of Bashan. The mention of these trees expands the images of destruction and the geographic region. The presumption of 11:2 seems to be that if the cedars are destroyed, then the slightly less valuable trees will fall as well. The mention of Bashan, however, expands the territory that will be affected by the devastation from the northwest to the northeast of Israel. Zechariah 11:3 then changes from the reaction of the trees to the sound made by the shepherds and lions whose habitations have disappeared. The shepherds and lions lament the magnificence of the forest that has been destroyed.

The imagery is clear, and the interconnected poetic lines provide a sense of increasing devastation. On a purely literal level, these lines are not that difficult to understand. There is, however, widespread agreement that these images cannot be interpreted on the literal level alone. Rather, scholars have long assumed the entities in these verses must be given some kind of symbolic value as well. When one tries to isolate and identify the symbols, however, consensus quickly breaks down. Clearly, if the trees, shepherds, and lions initially refer to *specific* persons, these identities have been lost to history. Nevertheless, one can, with good reason, assume that the trees generally represent regions while the shepherds and lions represent political groups.

Three of the geographic regions represented by the trees receive explicit identification as Lebanon (11:1), Bashan (11:2), and the

thickets of the Jordan (11:3). Two elements help to explain both the selection of these regions and the use of trees as metaphors in 11:1-3. First, these regions frequently symbolize the lush, verdant growth of forests because of the density of trees contained therein. Second, these regions are often associated with the ideal borders of Israel, or more specifically with the loss of territory that began in the Assyrian period. To be sure, it is not always clear whether the Lebanon region was thought to belong to Israel or merely served to mark the boundary of the land. Nevertheless, given that the context of the immediately preceding unit has to do with the return of northern kingdom exiles and the expansion of Israel's population, it seems clear that those who incorporated 11:1-3 certainly anticipated this expansion would involve territory in Lebanon.

The shepherds and the lions react vocally to the destruction of Lebanon and Bashan in 11:3, so clearly these metaphors function on a different level than the tree metaphors. Most likely, they refer not to the land itself but to groups that have opposing relationships to flocks. On the one hand, shepherds tend the flocks, feeding them and making sure they are safe. On the other hand, lions attack prey, and sheep would be easy targets. What strikes one as odd in this context is the assumption of sheep as inhabitants of Lebanon and Bashan, which 11:1-2 portray as heavily forested areas. Sheep are not generally raised in forests. Thus, it appears that Zechariah 11:1-2 and 11:3 mix two metaphors, one geographic and one demographic, to portray the danger to these regions. Nevertheless, it does not appear to be too great a stretch to suggest that the warning implicit in the wailing of the shepherds and the roaring of the lion assumes the loss of sheep from the devastation described in 11:1-2. Both those who tend to sheep and those who prey on the sheep will lose their source of sustenance.

CONNECTIONS

Zechariah 10:1–11:3 envisions a restoration of the Davidic kingdom that involves an eschatological battle. Remarkably, this reconstituted kingdom incorporates both Judah and Ephraim. The positive attitude toward Ephraim in Zechariah 10:7-12 (which continues with the placement of 11:1-3) mirrors the role of Judah

in 10:3-6, but it contrasts markedly with the basic thrust of Hosea and Amos, where the northern kingdom's rejection of YHWH was denoted regularly. This contrast becomes even more stark when it repeats with the Book of the Twelve's final message concerning the former northern kingdom in Zechariah 11:4-17—a passage that announces the utter rejection of the bond between Judah and Israel. What these passages do in Zechariah 9–11, thus, mirrors for the postexilic section of the Book of the Twelve a similar fate for Ephraim that appeared at the beginning of the corpus. A message of hope for the northern kingdom ends badly. Nevertheless, Zechariah 11:1-3 continues the promise language by anticipating a retaking of the land lost to the Assyrians.

What does one make of these alternating perspectives? It used to be popular to hear one speak of “the ten lost tribes of Israel,” but scholarship has largely demonstrated that these tribes did not disappear. To be sure, some migrated into the southern kingdom in the aftermath of the Assyrian overthrow of Israel. The size of Jerusalem roughly doubled in the last third of the eighth century BCE. Thus, while biblical texts speak of complete and utter deportation of the native population in the aftermath of Samaria's destruction, scholars largely discount this picture as hyperbole. Still, some kind of major demographic shift undoubtedly occurred when the Assyrians took over. The fate of Samaria became a paradigm for Jerusalem's destruction (see discussion of Mic 1:2-7).

Nevertheless, periodic traces of hope for a reunified Davidic kingdom appear in several places within the Book of the Twelve, and it is generally thought that such hopes reflect the views of those who edited books like Hosea and Amos during the exilic period. Several passages suggest a vibrant hope that the kingdom would reunite under a Davidic king (Hos 1:11; Amos 9:11-12; Mic 5:2-4). Other passages envision the territorial repopulation of the former northern kingdom by exiles who returned from distant lands. Zechariah 7–8, for example, begins and ends with a story of a delegation from Bethel that comes to Jerusalem to seek advice from the prophet (Zech 7:1-3; 8:18-19). This episode, vague as it is, suggests that in the late sixth century a group of YHWH worshipers in the former northern kingdom sought some kind of rapprochement with the religious leadership in Jerusalem. Thus, hope for some kind of restoration of the relationship between Judah and Israel can be seen from both sides of the equation.

On the other hand, one of the major antagonists for Nehemiah was the governor of Samaria, who resisted any attempt to restore Jerusalem to its former prominence. Moreover, the hope expressed in Judah for a reunified kingdom invariably involve a Davidic king in power, which would require the northern kingdom to cede political control of its territory to a ruler in Jerusalem. Further, assuming there is some degree of veracity behind the traditions of Josephus, the governor of Samaria in the fourth century shifted his allegiance from the Persian monarch to Alexander the Great and thereby secured permission to build an alternative temple on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. This action likely involved motives that were driven by religious, economic, and political agendas. As well, this act surely solidified religious and ethnic divisions between the two regions, and the Samaritan Pentateuch shows a decided preference for the northern tradition in contrast to the version of the Pentateuch recognized in Judah. By the time of the New Testament, relations between the two regions remained tense.

Doubtless, the trajectory toward the separation of the two regions appears clearer in hindsight than would have been evident during most of the Persian period. Yet, at some point, those compiling the Book of the Twelve deemed the topic of sufficient importance that it functions as one of the two major thematic poles around which Zechariah 9–11 revolves (the other being rest from aggression from the surrounding countries). Whether designed or not is difficult to determine, but the fact remains that this decision begins to create thematic bookends in the Book of the Twelve that will continue to unfold through the remainder of Zechariah and Malachi. Thus, in many respects, the decision to reprise these themes colors the Book of the Twelve with a kind of circularity. In the end, it leaves the impression that nothing much has changed. Differences between Ephraim and Judah remain unresolved. YHWH's people continue to find ways to worship improperly. Priests and other religious leaders are tempted to compromise their obligations to YHWH in order to advance their own economic interests. YHWH's people continue to discount YHWH's love for them and continue to treat one another with contempt.

To some, this circularity may seem pessimistic. Since the Book of the Twelve begins its story in the eighth century and that story continues to unfold well into the Persian period, one might be tempted

to ask, *What is the point? If this journey through time with prophetic voices leads to the same place where it began, then why is it important?* This way of thinking, however, misses a couple of points for understanding the didactic function of the Book of the Twelve. First, there is an important change at the end of Malachi that will be discussed with respect to Malachi 3:16–18. Second, and of equal importance, one should understand how this repetition functions theologically.

Theologically speaking, the repetition of accusations and temptations happens because it reflects the human condition, and as such, each generation must respond anew to the issues that faced their parents. Further, human beings, left to themselves, will generally act in their own selfish interests, typically unable to see the larger implications of their own selfishness. Moreover, these same texts that testify to the recurring nature of the human problem also repeatedly remind us that we are not left to ourselves. These texts testify to the acts of YHWH's compassion and to the promises of hope for a better way.

Theologically, this repetition also means that every generation must confront anew what it means “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” A parent's life of faithfulness to God cannot save a child if the child chooses to follow a different path. Conversely, the sins of a parent do not consign a child to make the same mistakes. Faithful living before God requires each of us to make that decision in our own time—perhaps by imitating the actions of our parents or perhaps by repudiating them—but the decision must be our own.

The relationship between Judah and Israel had its ups and downs. At times, hope was palpable. At other times, animosity reigned. The tradents who compiled the Twelve, however, hoped that the land could be reunited, its territory repopulated, and its divided past forgotten. [“Tradent”] Sadly, this vision did not come

true, but they can hardly be faulted for hoping it would.

Given that the structure of the end of the Twelve creates a cyclical return to the beginning of the Twelve, what difference does this make for communities of faith today? Reflections on this cycle can have personal, corporate, and ecclesiological benefits for shaping our lives. Individuals who contemplate the fate of Judah and Israel may learn to recognize who

“Tradent”



The word “tradent” refers to the person or group responsible for the transmission of a given corpus, text, or source.

they are in relationship to society and to the movement of history. As it did for the prophets of old, hope for change that results in a perfect world will always remain elusive. We should not expect heaven on earth. Corporately, we must learn, however, to think of the consequences of actions as part of our responsibility. The prophet's goal of return, restoration, and reconciliation in Zechariah 10 meets resistance from leaders who cannot or will not accept the idea because it involves risk. The goats would rather remain with things as they are than risk something new. In our day, vitriolic rhetoric spills from the lips of talking heads on every "news" channel as though screaming at one another more loudly will solve the economic and security problems that face the country. Decisions by leaders can thwart grand visions by playing on fear and resentment, but people of faith should fight back with words of hope and restoration. Ecclesiologically, communities of faith need to distinguish political tools from political identities. When the church sees a need about which it feels compelled to speak, it becomes tempted to enter the political fray by throwing its allegiance to one side or another. When it does so, however, it loses sight of what it means to belong to the kingdom of God.

NOTES

1. For Meyers and Meyers, the reference to a leaderless people is a reference to the Diaspora, specifically exiled northerners. See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 184–87. This interpretation seems too historically specific to account for the broad formulations.

2. See Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 197.

3. See Philip Sabin and Philip de Souza, "Land Battles," *Rome from the Late Republic to the Late Empire*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (ed. Philip Sabin and others; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 422–25.

4. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 212.

5. *Ibid.*, 212.

THE ENIGMATIC SHEPHERDS

Zechariah 11:4-17

A major break appears with Zechariah 11:4, as can be seen from several perspectives: the MT has a marker at the end of 11:3 indicating the end of a unit; the poetic forms of the preceding verses cease while a narrative begins; and a new messenger formula begins 11:4. As well, the theme changes dramatically from a promise of restoration to a parable regarding the destruction of Harmony and Unity, which in turn culminates in the annulment of a relationship between Judah and Israel (11:14) as well as the nations (11:10). Finally, there is clear evidence for where this unit breaks off, since 12:1 begins with a new superscription.

The compositional function and unity of these verses are deceptively complex, as is indicated by two recent commentaries: those of Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers and of David L. Petersen. Meyers and Meyers treat 11:4-16 as a narrative comprised of disparate elements that comment on the past rather than the present.¹ They are unique, or nearly so, in this respect. They interpret the shepherds as the false prophets of the past who, along with other leaders, helped account for the failure of Israel and Judah to live up to their covenant obligations. In other words, the narrative represents a kind of theological allegory regarding Israel's past. Hence, they waste no time on speculation regarding the identity of the shepherds, sellers, and the like. For them, these figures are not really specific individuals but an amalgamation of persons from the past.

Petersen reflects a more traditional approach. On the one hand, he treats the narrative as a symbolic action report confronting the current generation. On the other hand, Petersen follows Magne Saebo in considering 11:4-17 as a composite narrative comprised of two symbolic action reports joined by elaborative material.² The passage has two primary commands (11:4b, 15), each followed by interpretations of the respective symbolic act (11:6, 16). The relationship of these elements requires careful evaluation, especially since there is a third divine command (11:13a).

COMMENTARY

To make sense of Zechariah 11:4-17, one must first analyze the literary flow of the narrative, which is not an easy task, and then turn to the question of its function in the context of Zechariah 9–11. The complex narrative of Zechariah 11:4-17 can best be understood by following the narrative flow within this passage. [Narrative Flow of Zechariah 11:4-17] These segments include the following: (1) a sequence of three divine commands with interpretive matter

Narrative Flow of Zechariah 11:4-17

11:4-6: First command from YHWH and its interpretation

11:7-8: Report of performance of command and subsequent action (taking two staffs; removal of three shepherds)

11:9: Rejection of the flock by the prophet/shepherd

11:10-12: Report of symbolic act: breaking the first staff and request for payment

11:13: Second command from YHWH and report of performance

11:14: Report of symbolic act: breaking the second staff

11:15-16: Third command from YHWH and its interpretation

11:17: Poetic rejection of the Worthless Shepherd

(11:4-6, 13a, 15-16), two of which report that the command was performed (11:7-8, 13b); (2) two reports of symbolic acts related to the first performance report (11:10-12, 14); and (3) two brief statements of rejection (11:9, 17), the first advancing the narrative and the second, more poetic statement providing some resolution. Each of these segments provides material by which the narrative advances, but several of them, it should also be noted, obscure the narrative as well.

The narrative begins in 11:4-6 with the messenger formula (“Thus said the Lord my God”), which in turn introduces the first

command from YHWH to the prophet: “shepherd the flock doomed to slaughter.” The reason for this command unfolds in two steps. First, Zechariah 11:5 provides an assessment of the current situation in which the sheep of the flock are sold and then killed, making money for those involved in the transaction in the process. Two characteristics of these sellers stand out in 11:5: greed and antipathy. They rejoice in their wealth, and they show no compassion. From this scenario, 11:6 then provides the formal rationale for the command, beginning with “for” (*kî*): since the shepherds show no compassion on the flock, YHWH’s compassion has also reached its limits. As a result, the inhabitants of the land/earth would be devastated.

While the action of 11:4-6 is clear, it creates no small level of ambiguity when one tries to explain the identity of the characters. Presumably, the flock is intended to represent YHWH’s people, which would logically make the shepherds who sell the flock the leaders of YHWH’s people. This scenario, then, would accuse these leaders of mercilessly profiting from selling their own people. The

implied punishment, however, does not target these leaders but is directed against the inhabitants. Zechariah 11:6 presents this punishment as chaotic and brutal. Neighbor turns on neighbor, and each falls into the hand of their king, and the entire process leads to utter devastation of the earth. This punishment leaves the reader to ponder the fate of the flock and/or the justice of God. The sequence implied in these verses assumes that the sheep will die—either at the hand of the unscrupulous shepherds who sell them or in the subsequent devastation from whom no one will escape.

The second segment of the narrative builds on the first, essentially reporting in 11:7-8 that the prophet did as commanded in 11:4, but in the process the report also provides additional information in order to advance the narrative. Nevertheless, two pieces of this segment create significant confusion. The first requires a textual decision, while the second requires the reader to infer data that is not provided in the narrative. The first confusing element appears in 11:7ab, the phrase translated as “on behalf of the sheep merchants” by the NRSV (following the LXX). The MT, by contrast, has “therefore, the poor of the flock.” [\[Translating Zechariah 11:7\]](#) These two variant readings both presume the same consonantal text, but the words are divided differently, and they require the reader to interpret the actions differently.

The second point of confusion stems from the lack of available data with which to interpret the context of 11:8, where the prophet/shepherd claims to have gotten rid of three other shepherds because of their inability to get along with one another. Thus, the reader must here make some basic decisions: first, are these three shepherds (part of) the same group who was selling the flock in 11:5? Second, is the shepherd who is speaking to be trusted as a reliable character, or is he a petulant tyrant who cannot get along with other leaders? Third, what is the relationship of the shepherd speaking to those whom he has dismissed? These three questions cannot be answered with direct evidence from the text but must be inferred from the context. Not surprisingly, diverging interpretations of the narrative result from the way in which the interpreter answers these fundamental questions, and the possible combinations multiply exponentially as a result. In the interest of space and to avoid confusion, the following interpretation (1) understands the three shepherds as (at least part of) the group accused of selling the flock for money in 11:5; (2) treats the speaker

Translating Zechariah 11:7

ΑΩ Two textual traditions (the LXX and the MT) create alternative scenarios that affect the meaning of the narrative in English Bibles. The NRSV takes its clue from the LXX, while other translations (like the NAS, NIV) attempt to render the MT meaningfully.

11:7 (NRSV): So, <i>on behalf of the sheep merchants</i> , I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. I took two staffs; one I named Favor, the other I named Unity, and I tended the sheep.	11:7 (LXX): And I will tend the flock of slaughter in the land of Canaan: and I will take for myself two rods; the one I called Beauty, and the other I called Line; and I will tend the flock.	LXX
11:7 (NAS): So I pastured the flock <i>doomed to slaughter, hence the afflicted of the flock</i> . And I took for myself two staffs: the one I called Favor, and the other I called Union; so I pastured the flock.	11:7 (NIV): So I pastured the flock marked for slaughter, <i>particularly the oppressed of the flock</i> . Then I took two staffs and called one Favor and the other Union, and I pastured the flock.	MT

The word translated as “merchants” in the NRSV reads an emended text (one based on the reading in the LXX) as “Canaanites.” Literally, the MT has an appositional clause, *lâkên ʾāniyê haṣṣôʾn* (“therefore, the humble of the flock”), while the assumed Hebrew *Vorlage* of LXX combines the first two words to read *likna ʾāniyêy haṣṣôʾn* (“to the Canaanites of the flock”). In this reading, as in 11:11, the word “Canaanite” is, further, taken as a racially charged slur for “merchant.”

The debate about the meaning of this verse has implications for understanding the passage. Is the shepherd here acting on behalf of the humble of the flock or on behalf of those who traffic in the flock? Recently, more commentators and Bible translations have tended to emend the text to merchants of the flock rather than humble of the flock. This decision has implications with respect to who rejects and insults the prophet/shepherd. Those who interpret the group as the “merchants of the flock” take the clue from 11:5 and the reference to “those who buy them” and “those who sell them.” This interpretation, however, rests on a rather unusual idiom and a twice occurring emendation (admittedly attested in the LXX). Those interpreting the group as the “humble of the flock” argue that this phrase is not as nonsensical as many have claimed. If one interprets the group as the humble (or afflicted) of the flock, one can also make sense of this imagery. In 11:7, the humble of the flock functions as an appositional phrase for the flock to be slaughtered mentioned in the previous line. In 11:11, the humble of the flock deduce that the prophet’s action of breaking the covenant represented a genuine message from YHWH (“they knew that it was the word of YHWH”).

as reliable because YHWH has commanded him to assume the role of shepherd and he has done so; and (3) assumes that the shepherd appointed by YHWH should be conceived as having some kind of legitimate authority over the other shepherds.

Assuming, of course, that the term “shepherd” here represents a metaphor for leaders in general, the narrative implies that YHWH has placed the speaker in charge of other leaders and terminated three other shepherds whose cooperation with the divinely appointed shepherd could not be achieved. In essence, then, the situation described in this narrative represents a kind of internecine conflict, probably over some kind of economic policy that resulted in Judeans being sold into slavery when they could not pay their bills. In short, these leaders were selling citizens into slavery.

While one cannot claim that this scenario refers specifically to the events of Nehemiah 5, one can nevertheless say that Nehemiah 5 presents a plausible scenario against which Zechariah 11:4-17 can be understood. A reforming figure (like Nehemiah) confronts societal practices that benefited the wealthiest of the community by enslaving those who were least able to defend themselves. As long as this reformer had the power to make these reforms (whether through religious or political structures), it would not be difficult to imagine a scenario in which three other leaders could be terminated rather quickly. Such would seem to be the case implied by 11:8.

Thus, in 11:7a, the prophet recounts doing what he was earlier told (11:4) to do by YHWH: become a shepherd of the flock “doomed to slaughter.” In 11:7b-8, however, the prophet provides two additional pieces of information that further progress the narrative. First, he names not one but two staffs to symbolize his task. “Favor” and “Unity” characterize the tools, or perhaps better, the goals of this shepherd’s trade. Second, 11:8 quickly conveys the depth of resistance facing the prophet, as he is three times unable to find shepherds to work with him.

Interpreting 11:7-8 in this manner means that this divinely appointed prophet encountered considerable resistance to changing the economic policies in question. This resistance would help to explain the surprising resignation and curse language in the prophet’s rejection of the role of shepherd in 11:9. The prophet announces his resignation as shepherd, thereby consigning the flock to whatever fate the shepherds determine for it. The implied resistance would have made continuing in this role seem futile. Resignation from this position, from this shepherd’s perspective, would also consign the parties to a predictable outcome as implied by 11:9. The consequences articulated by the shepherd, death and betrayal, mirror the punishment pronounced by YHWH in 11:6. Left without a shepherd, the situation does not change and annihilation appears likely.

In the fourth segment of the narrative, 11:10-12, the prophet narrates his own symbolic act and its interpretation. At his own initiative, the prophet breaks the staff called “Favor,” which he had named in 11:7. In recounting the breaking of this staff, the prophet also narrates its meaning as the breaking of the covenant made with all peoples. Zechariah 11:11-12 advances the narrative by

Translating Zechariah 11:11

ΑΩ

The NRSV does not translate MT here, but assumes a textual variant from the LXX.

11:11 (NRSV): So it was annulled on that day, and *the sheep merchants, who were watching me*, knew that it was the word of the LORD.

11:11 (LXX): And it shall be broken in that day; and *the Canaanites, the sheep that are kept for me*, shall know that it is the word of the Lord. LXX

11:11 (NAS): So it was broken on that day, and *thus the afflicted of the flock who were watching me* realized that it was the word of the LORD.

11:11 (NIV): It was revoked on that day, and *so the afflicted of the flock who were watching me* MT knew it was the word of the LORD.

The MT has *wayêd'û kên 'ăniyêy hašô'n* ("they knew thus the humble of the flock"). The variant combines the consonants of two words in MT (*kên 'ăniyêy*, "thus, the humble") into a single word (*kēna'ăniyêy*, "Canaanites"), an ethnic slur that can mean traders or merchants in certain contexts. This slur likely derives from the socioeconomic situation of ancient Palestine. Because the Phoenicians had access to trade from the Mediterranean, Phoenician traders probably made their way to Jerusalem to sell their wares to the people of Judah. Phoenicians were also known as Canaanites. Thus, "Canaanite" became, for the people of Judah, a term associated with the Phoenician merchants who sold exotic items in the markets, so that someone who wanted to speak derisively of merchants would call them Canaanites.

recounting how this action was validated as the word of YHWH (11:11), prompting the prophet to request payment for his services (11:12).

For the second time in this passage (see 11:7), the NRSV follows a textual variant that combines two words into one in order to create the word "Canaanites" (understood as merchants) as represented by the LXX rather than the MT. [Translating Zechariah 11:11] This decision, however, masks the extremely ironic formulation of the action present in the MT. The verb "watching" in 11:11 does not mean "watching" in the sense of "seeing," as most English readers would probably assume. Rather, the verb in 11:11 is *šmr*, which means "watch" in the sense of "guard" or "protect," precisely the kind of activity one would expect from the shepherd watching the flock. By contrast, when the MT references the humble/oppressed of the flock who are "watching" the former shepherd, the reversal of stations becomes palpable. The flock is guarding the shepherd, for they recognize his actions as the word of YHWH.

At this point, and not before, the prophet/shepherd asks to be paid in 11:12, and the request is granted. Traditionally, the wage paid to the shepherd (thirty pieces of silver) has been interpreted negatively, probably for two reasons: this is the price one would pay for a slave killed accidentally according to Exodus 21:32, and this passage was probably interpreted by the Gospel writers as a prophecy fulfilled when Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. [Zechariah 11:13 and Judas] The extremely negative characteriza-

tion of this payment, however, has recently been challenged.³ While this price correlates with the cost of the slave, it also represents quite a bit more money than a day laborer would have received. When placed in this context, this wage would not be interpreted as insulting. One should be careful, therefore, not to criticize this act of payment too severely, though YHWH's second command to the prophet in 11:13 devalues the payment. YHWH commands the prophet to throw the payment into the temple treasury, and the command is followed by a rather brusque dismissal of the payment as of little consequence. The prophet then recounts his execution of this command.

Some speculation is required to make sense of this payment motif within the narrative flow, but the most likely explanation would be to challenge the accepted practice of paying prophets for their activities. In this respect, the group who recognizes the prophet's actions as the word of YHWH is requested to pay the fee, which they do. YHWH, however, refuses to allow the prophet to keep the money, commanding him instead to toss it into the temple treasury. Perhaps this action serves to blunt the charge that the prophet profits from his activity, a charge certainly implicit in the accusations of Amaziah against the prophet in Amos 7:12.

At any rate, the sixth segment of the narrative (11:14) quickly recounts another symbolic act related to the first. The prophet breaks the second staff, the one called "Unity," and interprets this action as breaking the family ties between Judah and Israel. It is impossible at this point to trace with certainty the events that led to the schism between Judah and the Samaritans, but surely this symbolic act reflects some level of growing tensions between the two regions. Additionally, this rejection of the ties between Judah and Israel contrasts markedly with the assumptions of Zechariah 9–10. At one end of the spectrum, Zechariah 7–8 presupposes some level of openness from the leadership of Bethel (a significant village in the heartland of Samaria) toward Jerusalem because Bethel sends a delegation to Jerusalem in order to consult with the prophet (see Zech 7:1-3). Relatedly, Zechariah 9–10 presumes some kind of coalition between Judah and Ephraim when confronting Greece

Zechariah 11:13 and Judas



Matt 27:3-5 recounts Judas's change of heart, which led him to return the thirty pieces of silver given to him to betray Jesus. When the priests refused to accept the money, Judas cast the silver into the temple before going out and hanging himself. Only Matthew relays the story of Judas's remorse. Matt 27:9 erroneously attributes the reference to Jeremiah, though some ancient Matthean manuscripts correctly attribute it to Zechariah. Clearly, casting thirty pieces of silver into the temple storehouse refers to Zech 11:12-13. This correlation of Judas with the one who throws the silver at least suggests the possibility that interpretations of the one casting down the silver in Zech 11:12-13 existed that treated the act negatively, as a betrayal of the flock as it were.

(9:13) and for repopulating the land of the former Davidic kingdom (10:7-12). At the other end of the spectrum, reports in Josephus (*Ant.*, 11:304–36; 13:74) suggest that shortly after Alexander's conquests of the region, the Samaritans constructed a rival temple on Mount Gerizim, formalizing a religious schism that many have interpreted as a pivotal event in creating animosity between Jews and Samaritans. (For pertinent materials from the Josephus account, see [Alexander and Josephus] in the introduction to Zechariah in this commentary.) The book of Nehemiah also portrays the leadership of Samaria as antagonistic toward the reconstruction of the city walls of Jerusalem. Sanballat, one of the chief nemeses of Nehemiah, was governor of the province of Samaria in the second half of the fifth century.

One can thus see evidence of a degeneration between the two regions in the extant literature of the Persian and Hellenistic periods, but the narrative report is simply too vague to determine the specific events to which Zechariah 11:14 alludes. The final message, though, provides an ending to the issue of the northern kingdom's fate that is remarkably similar to that portrayed in the opening sections of Hosea and Amos. Hosea and Amos engage the prospect of Israel's deliverance before ultimately rejecting any hope that the northern kingdom would change. Zechariah 9–11 explores the prospects of a reunified kingdom in chapters 9–10, but the last word concerning Israel in the Book of the Twelve (11:14) rejects the family ties between Judah and Israel.

The seventh segment of the narrative (11:15-16) takes the form of a third command from YHWH to the prophet (see also 11:4, 13), one introducing yet another symbolic action and its interpretation. Again, a deceptively simple narrative creates ambiguity for the reader. YHWH commands the prophet to take up the implements of a shepherd *again* in 11:15, which serves the dual function of reminding the reader of YHWH's first command to shepherd the flock doomed to slaughter (11:4) and also of the prophet's/shepherd's having destroyed the implements of the shepherd when he broke the two staffs in the previous verses. The reader is thus left to ponder whether this command is really telling the prophet to become a shepherd again, or whether the prophet is being told to take up the staffs again because YHWH will not let him walk away from his role as shepherd.

The interpretation of the symbolic act in 11:16 does little to alleviate this ambiguity. Zechariah 11:16 offers a rationale for the action of 11:15, but the rationale raises more questions than it answers. The reason the prophet is told to take up the implements of a shepherd again is that YHWH is raising up *another* shepherd in the land who will behave in exactly the opposite way that a shepherd should behave. This shepherd will not seek the lost sheep, nor will he care for those who are ill or dying. Instead, rather than attending to the healthy sheep, this shepherd will devour them. Two possible interpretations could explain the connection between this action and its interpretation. The prophet *becoming* a shepherd again could itself symbolize this *coming* shepherd. Or the prophet should take up the shepherd's implements *again* because another shepherd is about to enter the picture. The prophet/shepherd will have to resist in much the same manner as he resisted the three he already terminated. The former seems more logical. The only certainty, however, is that a threat is imminent, and it is probable that this shepherd who will soon arrive would have been understood as an indigenous leader (since YHWH claims to be raising him in the land).

The concluding segment of the narrative appears with 11:17, a verse rife with interpretive difficulties of a text-critical, linguistic, and literary nature. Text critically, translators have taken at least three different approaches to understanding the MT of 11:17a, as indicated by the LXX, the NRSV, and the NAS. [Translating Zechariah 11:17a] The third option makes the most sense and will be assumed here. Considerable debate exists concerning whether 11:17 represents (1) an integral part of the symbolic action report(s), (2) an independent oracle placed here by the compiler, or (3) a subsequent *Fortschreibung* (redactional continuation) by an editor.⁴ At issue is both the form and the style of 11:17, which stand out from the preceding narrative. The form is essentially a curse rather than a report, and the poetic style of the invective moves from an opening address to two parallel lines describing the punishment. The opening word of 11:17 (*hōy*) can introduce a new unit, but in this instance it seemingly reacts to the shepherd narrative.

The question of its relationship to the context is, in the end, less important (and perhaps less confusing) than the function of 11:17. At its core, 11:17 functions as a curse from YHWH, but it is not clear whether YHWH is rejecting the anti-shepherd introduced in

Translating Zechariah 11:17a

ΑΩ The consonantal text of 11:17a twice has a *yod* ending on words, but these endings create syntactical difficulties. The three alternatives that have been posed for translating the text are represented in the chart below:

LXX: Alas for the vain <i>shepherds</i> that have forsaken the sheep!	NRSV: Oh, <i>my</i> worthless <i>shepherd</i> , who <i>deserts</i> the flock!	NAS: Woe to <i>the</i> worthless <i>shepherd</i> who <i>leaves</i> the flock!
The sword shall be upon the arms of such a one, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be completely withered, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened.	May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be completely withered, his right eye utterly blinded	A sword will be on his arm And on his right eye! His arm will be totally withered, And his right eye will be blind.

The LXX presumes a *yod* on the end of the Hebrew words translated as “shepherd” and “forsake” has been understood as the sign of the plural construct. The resulting translation creates tension with the second half of the verse in which the recipient of the curse is clearly singular. Presumably, the LXX understood this curse to refer back to the three shepherds dismissed by the prophet/shepherd in 11:8. Few modern translations have followed the lead of the LXX at this point, but it does make sense of the consonantal text. In the second column, the NRSV understands the *yod* on the word for “shepherd” to be a 1cs suffix, hence “my . . . shepherd.” The problem with this translation is that it does not account for the *yod* on the end of the verb for “forsake.” The NRSV simply translates “forsakes” as a singular verb because “my shepherd” requires the singular. Further, translating the *yod* as a 1cs suffix on shepherd ends up having YHWH both claiming and cursing the same shepherd. Presumably, the logic runs that this verse refers to the same shepherd as 11:16, the one whom YHWH is about to send, which makes the claim of “my shepherd” at least understandable on a purely linguistic basis. The third approach, represented by the NAS (and others not mentioned) in the column on the right, treats the *yod* ending as the sign of the archaic, obsolete genitive ending that is added here to the singular noun for “shepherd” and the singular participle for “forsake.” While this option skirts the question of why such an archaic form would be utilized, it resolves the textual difficulty better than the other two options, especially since more than a dozen such endings have been isolated (see *GK* §90 l-m).

11:16 or the prophet/shepherd who quit his post in 11:9. Zechariah 11:17 pronounces punishment on the shepherd who has abandoned the flock, a punishment that leaves the shepherd physically incapable of performing the duties of the shepherd adequately. A shepherd wounded in this way—specifically, the loss of an arm and an eye—faces severe limitations precisely on the two functions most necessary to do the work of the shepherd: oversight and protection. A shepherd with one eye cannot adequately watch the flock, and a shepherd with one arm cannot fully protect the flock.

This punishment creates a rather confusing scenario for understanding 11:17. In essence, the verse pronounces punishment on a foolish shepherd, which the reader assumes must relate to the narrative in some fashion. It calls into question the power of this character to perform his duties, but to which of the shepherds in the narrative does it refer? Why, one may wonder, does 11:16 announce that YHWH will send this anti-shepherd if 11:17 turns right around and announces a curse upon the shepherd that will limit the shepherd’s ability to lead the flock? Or does the reference to the shepherd who abandons the flock in 11:17 actually refer to

the resignation of the prophet/shepherd in 11:9? If so, then 11:17 casts the preceding narrative in an entirely different light by essentially denouncing the prophet's abdication of his own leadership responsibilities. Seen in this light, the narrative could be read as a strong admonition to follow through on one's appointed task when that task comes from YHWH. Such ambiguity lies in the nature of the narrative itself.

CONNECTIONS

To interpret the shepherd narrative in 11:4-17 is in many respects—to paraphrase Winston Churchill—to *interpret an enigma wrapped in a riddle*. Scholars have poked and prodded at this narrative for generations only to be confounded by the confusing array of shepherd figures, narrative loose ends, and textual difficulties. This passage continually resists any attempt to force a single interpretation on the narrative we have.

One thing, though, is clear from this passage. Whether a parable, an allegory, or a symbolic act, this passage creates a conversation about the complexity of leadership. Leadership is most needed when a desperate situation requires change, but change creates resistance. Leadership is most powerful when acting on behalf of God to help those least able to help themselves, but resistance to leadership is never more daunting than when those in power feel their own interests are under attack. Leadership is most effective when it refuses to cater to those in power, but those who stand up to those in power will pay a price. With these juxtapositions in mind, perhaps the mystery of this passage stems less from its inherent ambiguities and more from our own unwillingness to place ourselves within the story. Life does not come with an instruction manual, and the Bible, the church's faith book, cannot be read effectively if all one seeks are clearly articulated rules for living.

Perhaps, then, we should interpret this story as an allegory for the postexilic community. In this scenario, inappropriate use of power and greed threaten the flock, and God calls a shepherd to act on behalf of the flock. Despite the shepherd's best efforts, the task is simply too big, with too many conflicting agendas. When the other shepherds fail to cooperate, the prophet/shepherd then acts out the

implications for the flock and the other shepherds. He breaks the staff named “Favor” to demonstrate that Judah faces great risk from the surrounding territories. He breaks the staff named “Unity” to show that Judah and Israel will never be combined again into a single kingdom. Despite all of the potential of the promise for peace in Jerusalem conveyed in Zechariah 9–10—a promise of peace that comes with the defeat of the surrounding nations and with the reunification of the land—Zechariah 11:4-17 succumbs to a more sobering view of reality. Judah’s world will never be free of strife, neither externally nor internally. No single leader, no matter how dedicated, could have stopped the disaster awaiting the community. In this scenario, the present crises will never be solved in their entirety because human nature acts in its own interests.

What this scenario does, however, is to set the stage for Zechariah 12–14, where YHWH will act on the day of YHWH’s choosing to change the way the world operates.

Perhaps we should take the allegory a step further and interpret this story as an allegory for our own lives when we are called to lead a people in crisis. The shepherd/prophet in this story responds to God’s command to become a shepherd, and his life is never the same. He replaces other shepherds who are not acting on behalf of the flock, but he is unable to continue making the changes necessary to avoid annihilation. The shepherd’s message is recognized as the word of God by those of the flock most in need, but then the shepherd must be guarded by the flock. The shepherd requests a living wage, but God will not let him keep it. The shepherd breaks the implements he has used in his task so that Favor and Unity are no longer the tools of his trade. Then, just when the prophet/shepherd thinks he has done all he can do, God calls him again. God calls the shepherd with his broken staffs because the alternative is nearly incomprehensible. If

Shepherds in Art

While Zechariah’s shepherd imagery remains ambiguous, portrayals of shepherds in Christian art draw on idyllic portrayals of shepherds used to illustrate the idea of Jesus as the “good shepherd” as in John 10:11. Illustrations of these positive portrayals are ubiquitous, as seen in this painting by Plockhorst, which echoes metaphors of Jesus as shepherd.



Bernhard Plockhorst (1825–1907). *The Good Shepherd*. (Credit: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernhard_Plockhorst_-_Good_Shepherd.jpg)

this shepherd abandons the flock, who is to say the next shepherd will not aggressively undo any good that has been done? In this scenario, the only thing worse than answering the call to shepherd a flock doomed to slaughter is not to answer the call. This story, when addressed to leaders, calls for faithful living despite the odds for success and despite the high price for being faithful. In this sense, it really does not matter which shepherd is addressed at the end because the issue is whether the shepherd abandons the flock. In the end, the motivation is not the crucial issue. Whether operating from self-interest to profit from selling the flock, or whether acting out of fear when one encounters the resistance, both groups of leaders fail the flock. But God does not stop calling the shepherds.

NOTES

1. Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1993) 297–301.

2. David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 88, 90; Magne Saebo, *Sacharja 9-14. Untersuchungen von Text und Form* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 34; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969) 276–82. Petersen differs from Saebo, however, concerning the question of whether 13:7-9 is inherently associated with 11:4-17. Petersen separates 13:7-9 from 11:4-17, arguing that the canonical context of 13:7-9 has more to do with its formulation than does 11:4-17. Saebo sees 13:7-9 as integrally related to 11:4-17, but he describes the composite character of 11:4-17 as due to a secondary expansion by the insertion of 11:13-14.

3. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 275–80; see also Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (NCB; London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) 126.

4. For example, Meyers and Meyers treat this verse as an independent prophetic oracle marked by the introduction “Woe,” that, together with 11:1-3, frames the narrative (11:4-16). By contrast, Petersen and Redditt treat 11:17 as an essential part of the narrative itself, though Redditt sees the entire chapter as a thematic collection around the Shepherd motif. See Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 289–90, 303–304; Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14*, 99–100; Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 127.

ESCHATOLOGICAL VICTORY AND MOURNING

Zechariah 12:1-14

Despite the fact that this chapter fairly clearly divides into three sections (12:1, 2-11, 12-14), there is no easy way to explain the coherence of Zechariah 12. On the one hand, the frequent use of introductory formulas gives the impression of a collection of sayings gathered together thematically. There simply does not appear to be a direct line of thought developing between the various units. Instead, one receives the impression that something new is starting every few verses, so that one could conceivably find as many as nine different units in this chapter.

On the other hand, themes and motifs in one verse frequently pick up imagery from the preceding verses, and in some cases add information that moves the action along. It is hard to imagine that so many independent sayings could have been at the disposal of the collectors, sayings that began with “on that day” and share so many common topics. Rather, while Zechariah 12 should be classified as a collection of sayings, one must also reckon with editorial placement and adaptation of the introductory formula to give the impression of cohesion.

It seems likely that 12:2-11 should be seen as a compilation that seeks to present an eschatological scenario in which the surrounding nations are punished while Jerusalem and Judah are restored to God’s favor. Following a thematic introduction (12:2), this scenario unfolds with a series of seven “on that day” formulas (12:3, 4, 6, 8 [2x], 9, 11) describing various aspects of the judgment. Zechariah 12:12-14 has its own internal logic and seems to be positioned in its current location based on some perception of the leadership in Jerusalem at the time it was composed. As an independent entity, however, 12:12-14 requires some context to know why those in Jerusalem would be mourning. In this respect, 12:10 or 12:11 makes more sense with 12:12-14 than presuming they represent an independent saying, so 12:12-14 was probably composed as a response to 12:2-11.

COMMENTARY

Superscription for Zechariah 12-14, 12:1

The superscription of Zechariah 12:1 divides into two parts syntactically. Zechariah 12:1a functions as the superscription for Zechariah 12-14, and its syntax sets it apart from 12:1b. Moreover, the superscription in 12:1a appears in English translations based on

Translating Zechariah 12:1a

One interpretive avenue treats the first word of 12:1 (*maššâ*) as a construct noun and translates it with the remainder of 12:1a as a single phrase: “the oracle/burden of the word of YHWH.” This syntactical track further divides into two basic renderings. The first is held by those who understand the first word in the verse, *maššâ*, to mean “burden of” (such as KJV, NAS) or “oracle” in the sense of revelation (such as NET). For possible interpretations of *maššâ*, see comments on Zech 9:1. The second avenue for interpreting 12:1a considers *maššâ* an independent noun in the absolute state (so the NRSV and RSV), giving the verse three levels of a superscription, only one of which connects with the following material: “An Oracle. The word of YHWH concerning Israel. An utterance of YHWH, who” The first alternative is preferable, however, because 12:1a is only loosely connected to 12:1b, and translating *maššâ* by itself then creates a cumbersome three-stage superscription.

two different interpretations of the syntax. The first sees 12:1a as a single complex syntactical unit, while the other breaks it into two parts. [Translating Zechariah 12:1a] The stylistic tension of *maššâ* preceding “the word of YHWH” likely derives from an editorial decision to imitate the superscription of Malachi 1:1 and Zechariah 9:1 as part of the shaping of the Book of the Twelve.

Reference to “Israel” in 12:1a does not fit the context of what follows, except in the more inclusive sense of the entire people of YHWH. “Israel” appears only here in Zechariah 12-14. However, since much of Zechariah 10-11 (as well as 9:13) reflects on the role of the former northern kingdom in the postexilic context, several scholars suggest that the superscription in 12:1 reflects awareness of its preceding context, since 9-11 at first anticipates that Israel will have a role as part of the reconstituted Davidic empire (9:13; 10:6-12), but then rejects Israel (11:14). Thus, while the term presents a curiosity, it almost certainly signifies the genuine people of YHWH, not a political entity. In this respect, it differs from the references to “Ephraim” (9:10, 13; 10:7), “all the tribes of YHWH” (9:1), and “the house of Joseph” (10:6) in Zechariah 9-10.

The formula that begins 12:1b introduces three participial phrases, similar to those one would expect to find in hymnic doxologies. Zechariah 12:1b exhibits the character of an expansive, formal introduction to preexisting source material. The fact that it draws specifically from the creation stories of Genesis 1-2 provides this introduction with a theological purpose—namely the re-creation of Judah and Jerusalem—that functions appropriately, though not seamlessly, with what follows in 12:2-14.

The second half of 12:1 evokes the language of God as Creator with a series of allusions to YHWH's role in creating the heavens and earth. Two points of interest stand out. First, these allusions appear to recall deliberately both the Priestly and the Yahwistic creation accounts. The merism (see [Merism] in Zech 8) of the heavens and earth (see Gen 1:1; 2:1) in the context of creation certainly echoes the theme of Genesis 1 (the Priestly creation account) even though the verb "founded" (*yśd*) does not appear there.¹ By contrast, the verb "formed" (*yśr*) in 12:1 does appear in the Yahwistic account (Gen 2:7, 8), which refers to YHWH's creation of the man and to YHWH's breathing the breath (*rûaḥ*) of life into the man. Second, the use of creation language from Genesis 1–2 offers an interesting parallel to the beginning of Zephaniah (1:2–3). The literary function of these allusions, however, could not be more different. Whereas Zephaniah 1:2–3 invokes the Priestly creation account to anticipate the undoing of creation, Zechariah 12:1 evokes both creation accounts to introduce the eschatological restoration of Jerusalem and Judah.

Thus, the entirety of 12:1 stands apart as a new thematic introduction whose opening superscription has verbal ties to both Zechariah 9:1 and to Malachi 1:1. For this reason, Zechariah 12:1 probably was conceived as an introduction to the thematic block of 12–14.

Victory over the Nations "On that Day," 12:2–11

Zechariah 12:2 introduces a more narrowly focused topic than 12:1b that occupies the remainder of the chapters to follow, specifically the fate of Jerusalem and Judah on the coming day of YHWH. Jerusalem (eleven times) and/or Judah (six times) appear in every subunit within 12:2–11, a fact made all the more obvious by the recurring use of the eschatological formula "on that day" at the beginning of six of these subunits (12:3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11).² In 12:2, YHWH pronounces imminent action whereby Jerusalem will become "a cup of reeling for all the surrounding peoples." The image of a cup of reeling appears in other prophetic texts, notably Jeremiah 25:15 and Obadiah 16. In these contexts some entity receives a cup, the contents of which cause that entity to stagger when they drink it. Thus, in prophetic polemic, the outcome of drinking from such a cup bodes ill for the one drinking from it. In the metaphorical language of 12:2, Jerusalem functions as the con-

tents of the cup, while the surrounding peoples are the ones who drink from it. In other words, Jerusalem represents a temptation to imbibe, but the surrounding peoples do not understand that their drinking from this cup will have negative consequences for them.

The role of Judah in 12:2 has been the subject of no small debate. Specifically, the Hebrew syntax of the phrase containing “Judah”—that is, the phrase “it will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem”—has been interpreted variously. For some, this phrase means that Judah will also be among those attacking Jerusalem.³ In short, this interpretation reads the phrase as evidence of an internecine conflict between the returning exiles and those who had remained in the land. Increasingly, however, this interpretation has fallen out of favor, for it not only stands in contrast to the phrase’s larger context, where Judah and Jerusalem are not in conflict, but it also does not take into account that the phrase’s cumbersome syntax *can be* interpreted as indicating that both Judah and Jerusalem will come under attack from the surrounding peoples (KJV, NAS, NIV, etc.).

Zechariah 12:3 begins with the first of six eschatological “on that day” formulas that function as introductions in this chapter (12:3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11). These formulas not only provide the chapter with a strong future orientation but also give it the feel of a thematic collection that focuses on the ultimate fate of Judah and Jerusalem. The metaphor changes from a cup of reeling in 12:2 to a heavy stone in 12:3, but 12:3 essentially parallels the message of 12:2. A threat against Jerusalem from the nations will harm those nations instead of Jerusalem.

The images of a military threat from the nations that leads to an eschatological overthrow of the nations comes close to the scene portrayed in Joel 3. The major distinction between these two portraits lies in the way that YHWH plays a more active role as eschatological judge in Joel 3. A similar battle scene also appears in Zechariah 14, so one cannot claim literary dependency. Nevertheless, here one finds yet another instance of the historical paradigm “anticipated” in Joel playing out within the Book of the Twelve (see the introduction to Joel).

Next, the text focuses the reader’s attention on the effects of YHWH’s action against the nations. The horses referenced in 12:4 convey an image of military activity, thus illuminating the imagery of the threat from the nations in 12:2, 3. In 12:4, YHWH takes an

active role in the battle as the one maiming the horses and the enemies.

Zechariah 12:4 uses the language of Deuteronomy 28:28 to articulate the threat of destruction.⁴ [Zechariah 12:4 and Deuteronomy 28:28] This use of Deuteronomy 28 conveys a sense of irony, since the threats in Deuteronomy 28 are directed against Israel as curses should Israel break its covenant. Zechariah 12:4, by contrast, uses this language as a promise to judge the nations who will attack Judah. This type of intertextuality consistently shows itself in Zechariah 9–14.

Zechariah 12:5 offers an unusual perspective whereby the families of Judah speak admiringly of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The term “clans of Judah” (*ʿalufê yěhûdâ*) in 12:5 refers to the larger sociological unit beyond the immediate family. It may also have military connotations in some contexts, however, since such extended family units could function as military regiments as well. Nevertheless, this particular term for clan more consistently evokes relational and familial connotations when it appears in other Old Testament texts.

Zechariah 12:5b presents an interpretational issue with respect to how one understands the Hebrew words *yôšēb* and its plural *yôšēbē* in 12:5 and elsewhere in this context (12:7, 8, 10; 13:1). Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers make a sustained case for understanding the word to refer to leaders, interpreting it as a technical term for royal bureaucracy.⁵ No English translations have understood the term in this way; nor do ancient versions or recent lexicons offer much support for this reading. While such a nuance offers some intriguing interpretive possibilities, the evidence for such an interpretation is lacking. Rather, the entire tenor of Zechariah 12 relates to the broader population of Jerusalem, not to the leadership exclusively.

Zechariah 12:5b reads awkwardly in the MT: “the strength (belonging) to me *are* the inhabitants of Jerusalem through YHWH Sebaoth their God.” Most English translations omit the phrase “to me” (so NRSV, NIV) or change it to plural (NAS) to smooth the syntax. Nevertheless, the point appears to be that the inhabitants find their strength through the combined force of their fellow citizens fighting under the banner of YHWH. In this sense

Zechariah 12:4 and Deuteronomy 28:28



Deut 28:28 appears in the midst of a series of curses (28:15-45) detailing what YHWH will do to Israel if they break the covenant, while Zech 12:4 uses the language to pronounce judgment on the peoples while protecting Judah.

Zech 12:4 (NRSV): On that day, says the LORD, I will strike every horse with *panic* (*timāhôn*), and its rider with *madness*. But on the house of Judah I will keep a watchful eye, when I strike every horse of the peoples with *blindness*.

Deut 28:28: The LORD will afflict you with *madness, blindness, and panic* (*timāhôn*).

then, the 1cs suffix works in spite of the awkward shift to the third person plural reference to their God: “The inhabitants of Jerusalem are my strength through YHWH Sebaoth their God.” Since this assessment is spoken by the clans of Judah, 12:5 subtly elevates Jerusalem over Judah. The same subtle distinction shows itself again in 12:7, except there Judah receives preference.

The next small unit, Zechariah 12:6-7, begins with the third eschatological “on that day” formula in this chapter, but as with the previous unit, the theme of the new unit picks up where the previous verse left off. Whereas 12:3 and 12:4 (both having their own introductory formula) focus on the fate of the nations, 12:5 changes the focus to the strength of Judah and Jerusalem. With the new introductory formula, 12:6-7 expands on the image of the strength of Judah, while 12:8 will return to focus on the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The unit begins with metaphors depicting the power of Judah’s clans like the power of fire: they will be like a flaming pot among the trees, like a torch laid to piles of harvested grain. In short, this destructive force will consume quickly, and in every direction, because what it touches cannot withstand the heat of its power. The result of this devouring by fire will be twofold: (1) all the surrounding peoples will be destroyed, and (2) Jerusalem will be reinhabited. This attitude toward Judah and Jerusalem as a destruc-

Political Constellations and Dating



To what extent these images of a militarily aggressive Judah and Jerusalem help one to date this passage is difficult to say. On the one hand, they do seem to presuppose a coalition of the larger territory of Judah combined with an inhabited Jerusalem, so one can safely eliminate the exilic period. Most of the early Persian period texts convey a stronger sense of optimism about the future (see Haggai and Zech 1–8). Malachi, frequently dated to the mid-fifth century, and Ezra/Nehemiah hardly convey such militant pictures of Judah’s power, even for the future. How long it took, however, for an attitude to develop wherein Judah and Jerusalem would be conceived as a military power is impossible to say definitively. Such attitudes may have been given credence by the community already in the middle of the fifth century, but they would probably have been more prevalent the closer one got to the end of the Persian period or in the aftermath of Alexander’s campaign (332 BCE), when it was clear that Persia’s power was waning. Similar images of a militarily aggressive Jerusalem appear in Mic 4:13 and Obad 19-20, both texts that seem to be relatively late.

tive military power belies the relative obscurity of Persian period Yehud, which was sparsely populated and only militarized in the latter half of the fifth century, but even then under the subservience of Persian hegemony. [Political Constellations and Dating] Consequently, images of Judah’s eschatological power do not comport well with what we know of the historical realities of the Persian period. Rather, such images represent a future power in a world radically changed by YHWH.

Next, on some level, Zechariah 12:7 conveys cognizance of the relative power of Judah (however that is understood) over against the leadership and the pop-

ulation of Jerusalem. Zechariah 12:7 presupposes the aggressive action of 12:6, but then gives preference to the “tents of Judah” rather than the “house of David” or “the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” The phrase “tents of Judah” probably alludes to Judah’s army. Their anticipated victory places them on equal footing with the descendants of David and the Jerusalemites. Zechariah 12:7 functions as an editorial transition because its primary purpose seems to be to downplay 12:8.

Beginning in 12:8, the topic changes yet again with the fourth eschatological “on that day” formula. (Incidentally, this verse also contains the fifth example of this phrase, though it does not function as an introductory formula when it appears the second time.) Zechariah 12:8 returns to a group mentioned in 12:5 but overlooked in 12:6-7—specifically, “the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” This verse extols the virtues of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a powerful military entity. Yet the comparative logic of 12:8 borders on the hyperbolic. Indeed, to say that the weakest of the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be like David himself is a powerful political statement, since David, as king, would have been Judah’s soldier par excellence.

Further, the statement that the “house of David” shall be “like God” conveys at least two noteworthy points. First, power is attributed to the descendants of David. In spite of a lack of evidence that the Davidic line continued to exercise substantive power beyond the appointment of Zerubbabel, the Davidides represented an ongoing social group at this point. From what little information we have available, the last Davidic heir to be appointed governor by the Persians was Zerubbabel, who was governor in 520 BCE, though how long he was so is difficult to know with certainty.⁶ Nevertheless, 12:8 (see also 12:12) presupposes that the Davidides were still a viable political force. Second, the comparison of the “house of David” to God while leading the inhabitants of Jerusalem should not be taken as a claim of divinity as such, but as a claim of royal power in general in the ancient Near East. This phrase should be heard as an assertion of authority not unlike the assignation that Moses will be “like God” to Aaron (Exod 4:16). In the ancient Near East, including Judah, the relationship between king and deity was always conveyed as a special one. So, for example, the coronation hymn of Psalm 2 quotes God calling the king “my son” (2:7). Nevertheless, the phrase is unique in biblical

The Messenger of YHWH

AO The phrase “messenger/angel of YHWH” in Zech 12:8 should be distinguished conceptually from the use of the phrase in Haggai and Malachi. Both Hag 1:1 and Mal 1:1 refer to the prophets of those writings as the “messenger of YHWH.” The Hebrew word *mal’ak* can be used of humans carrying out specific tasks, typically acting on behalf of the king, or it can be used of the messenger entities of the heavenly realm. During the postexilic period, these heavenly messengers played an increasingly significant role, whether interpreting dreams or patrolling the earth as in Zech 1–6, in bringing matters to God’s attention as in Job 1–2, or in later works as part of the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil as in portions of *1 Enoch*. “Angel” in 12:8 relates to the previous phrase “like God” as a clarifying comment. The phrase actually interrupts the syntax of the verse with an appositional clause, and it may represent a later gloss, toning down the unique phrase that the house of David will be like God. If so, it would certainly represent an understandable theological correction.

texts when applied to a group, which may explain the appositional clause that follows, correcting any false impression by comparing the house of David to the messenger of YHWH. **[The Messenger of YHWH]**

Zechariah 12:9 begins with the sixth eschatological “on that day” formula of the chapter. Unlike the previous subunits, however, it does not pick up where the previous unit left off. Rather, it goes back and reiterates the theme from 12:2, specifically the destruction of the nations who attack Jerusalem. Zechariah 12:9 also moves the action along as it transitions to the next verses in that it reminds the reader of the eschatological battle. Subsequent material deals with the aftermath of the battle.

The relationship of 12:10 to the destruction of the nations in 12:9 deserves comment. One can only assume the two verses are intended to be read together, but Zechariah 12:10 takes on a

dramatically different character. Specifically, it shifts from aggressive military images related to the punishment of the nations to the topic of the compassion and petitions of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the house of David. In fact, the groups mentioned in 12:10 (and the remainder of the chapter) are all presented as mourning over an enigmatic, unidentified figure whom “they” have killed. **[The Use of Zechariah 12:10 in the New Testament]**

Zechariah 12:11 begins with the seventh eschatological “on that day” formula, and like the second, third, and fourth occurrences of this formula in Zechariah 12, its thematic focus picks up where the previous verse left off. Specifically, the motif of mourning in Jerusalem with which 12:10 ended becomes the focus of 12:11-14. The location of mourning in 12:11 has engendered considerable discussion. At issue lies a debate about the meaning of the phrase “Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo,” as well as the identity of the one who is being mourned. The plain of Megiddo refers to a wide flat land nestled between several mountains. Because of the natural topography, it

The Use of Zechariah 12:10 in the New Testament



This verse has been used as a christological proof text for the wounded Messiah who will play a role in the final eschatological judgment (John 19:37; Rev 1:7). This hermeneutical shift represents a Christian actualization of 12:10 to speak about the final judgment, not the original meaning of the text.

Megiddo



Megiddo is both a plain and a town. A topographical map of Israel would provide a clear picture of why the plain of Megiddo was such a prominent location for battles. The large flat area of Megiddo stands out markedly from the mountainous terrain around it. Megiddo's role as the place of Josiah's death (2 Kgs 23:29) probably helped it be remembered as a place of significant battles. The significance of Megiddo becomes heightened based upon a variant of the name in New Testament tradition. The name Armageddon (KJV; Harmageddon, NRSV) is transliterated from the Greek *'armagedōn* in Revelation 16:16 as the site where the "kings of the whole world" will be assembled for battle on the "great day of the Lord" (16:14). Armageddon is, in turn, the Greek pronunciation of the Hebrew *har megiddō*, which means "mountain of Megiddo." This may refer to the ruins of the city Megiddo that would likely have been visible as a tell in the first century CE. The tell was excavated in the twentieth century, and rises above the floor of the valley, as evident from the picture here.



Megiddo Aerial (Credit: Bibleplaces.com)

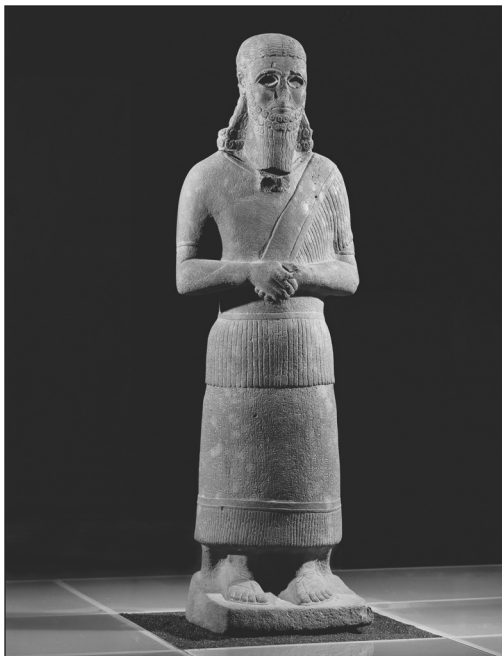
was often a place for battle. [Megiddo] Megiddo is also the place where Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco II according to 2 Kings 23:29-30.

The name "Hadad-rimmon" is otherwise unknown, and scholars have debated whether the epithet refers to a place or to a deity. Hadad and Rimmon can be explained by themselves, but elsewhere they are never used together like this. "Hadad" is the name of a storm god known from early Ugaritic texts, whose name even appears in places as a synonym for the Syrian king (for example, "Ben-Hadad" in 1 Kgs 15:18-20; 20:1-34; Amos 1:4 simply means son of Hadad). It may thus have symbolic value, but the name was widely known and became itself a name for humans as in the Edomite named Hadad in 2 Kings 11:14-22. "Rimmon," in this context, may reflect a variant spelling of Ramman, a name that is itself an alternative name used for Hadad (see 2 Kgs 5:18, where reference to the "house of Rimmon" appears to have this meaning). Rimmon is also the name of a town in the former northern kingdom, located in the mountain regions west of the Sea of Galilee (and east of the plain of Megiddo).

Because Hadad was associated with Baal, the fertility god who died and rose to symbolize the seasons of the year, it is possible—

Hadad

Hadad was originally a weather god centered in Syria. The statue here dates to the ninth century BCE.



Basalt statue dedicated to Hadad, god of thunderstorms, by Shamash-nuri and Hadad-isi, king of Suzana and his son. From Tell Fekherye. Assyrian, 9th C. BCE. National Museum, Damascus, Syria. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

according to some—that the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon in 12:11 refers to a ritual mourning ceremony associated with this deity.⁷ Or, according to others, the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon refers to an otherwise unknown village in the valley of Megiddo. Some suggest that mourning in Megiddo refers to Josiah's death and that Hadad-Rimmon could have been a small village where these rituals took place.⁸ Following this line of reasoning, then, one would have to assume knowledge of a fairly significant religious ritual mourning the death of the fertility god that would have taken place in the valley of Megiddo. Whether it refers to a place or a deity, Zechariah 12:11 compares this mourning ritual to the mourning that will take place in Jerusalem following the battle against the nations, which has been described in 12:2-10. No other sources describe such a ritual in the valley of Megiddo, but the rhetoric of 12:11 clearly presumes that the

readers know about this mourning ritual as a major time for expressing sadness to which the mourning in Jerusalem after the battle is compared.

Jerusalem Mourns the One Fallen, 12:12-14

Zechariah 12:12-14 describes (1) the participants of a mourning ritual associated contextually with the eschatological battle of 12:10 and (2) someone who was stabbed to death. This list of ritual participants has a formal character. It begins and ends with a summary statement referring to the land (12:12) and all the families (12:14) and that frames the mention of four groups and their wives (the houses of David, Nathan, Levi, and the family of the Shimeites). The reasons for choosing these four groups certainly has to do with their role as leaders of the Jerusalem community, but the precise function of at least two of these groups (Nathan, Shimeites) remains somewhat speculative.

The “house of David” clearly refers to the descendants of the kings of Judah. Zechariah 12:12 obviously reflects the assumption that this group still has an important function within the community, even though they no longer function as royalty from the Persian period onward. While Zerubbabel was appointed governor by the Persians in the late sixth century, and while his appointment generated, at least among some, hope that a Davidide would return to the throne (see Hag 2:20-23), the Persians apparently did not continue appointing Davidides. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah, for example, claims Davidic descent. Still, this prestigious family likely continued to play a prominent role for the Judean postexilic community.⁹ [Davidides in Postexilic Biblical Texts]

At least two interpretive possibilities have been suggested for understanding the “house of Nathan.” First, a number of people named “Nathan” appear in the Old Testament, but only two are prominent enough to explain why a reader might be expected to know the identity of the “house of Nathan” in 12:12. Specifically, “Nathan” must either refer to the prophet in David’s court or to one of David’s sons. Meyers and Meyers believe that Nathan, son of David, makes more sense: as a subset, so to speak, of all the sons of David, such a reference would parallel the reference to the family of Shimei in 12:13, since Shimei was a son of Levi and thus represents a subset of the house of Levi. Such an interpretation is certainly possible, but Nathan the prophet would arguably be far more prominent in the minds of the readers of these texts.

Moreover, if one assumes that Nathan here refers to the son of David, then this passage is limited to the mourning of royal and priestly parties. If one interprets Nathan as the prophet, then the text describes the mourning of prophets, priests, and kings. The

Davidides in Postexilic Biblical Texts



It is important to recognize a significant number of persons with Davidic lineage who are mentioned in postexilic texts, mostly in lists of inhabitants and returnees.

Person

Sheshbazzar—born c. 592

Zerubbabel—born c. 558

Shelomith—born c. 540

Hananiah—born c. 545

Shecaniah—born c. 520

Hattush—born c. 495

Elioenai—born c. 470

Texts

Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14, 16

Ezra 2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2-3; 5:2; Neh 7:7; 12:1, 47; Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4, 21, 23; Zech 4:6-10

1 Chr 3:19; 23:18; 2 Chr 11:20; Ezra 8:10

Ezra 10:28; Neh 3:8, 30; 7:2; 10:23; 12:12, 41

Ezra 8:3, 5; 10:2; Neh 3:29; 6:18; 12:3

Ezra 8:2; Neh 3:10; 10:4; 12:2

Ezra 10:22, 27; Neh 12:41

latter avenue appears more likely in this context, since it would represent a more inclusive grouping of those participating in the mourning ritual. However, a definitive decision remains elusive.

The “family of the house of Levi” also creates ambiguity. The role of the Levites shifted over time. For example, in many preexilic texts they are portrayed as village priests who collect taxes and bring them to Jerusalem, and perform other cultic functions in their respective villages and in Jerusalem. However, during the Persian period the Levites were relegated to the status of secondary clerics, whose functions in the Jerusalem temple were subordinated to those of the Aaronite priests.

The “family of the Shimeites” are the fourth group named in 12:12-14 and the only one not preceded with “house of.” To complicate matters even more, “Shimei” is an even more common name in biblical texts than “Nathan,” designating at least fifteen different people. Most prominent among these people, however, is the descendant of Gershom. In some texts, Gershom is one of the two sons of Moses, who was himself of Levitic descent (Exod 2:22; 18:3). Gershom is also one of the sons of Levi, but not the line that leads directly to Moses (1 Chr 6:1, 16-20). Nevertheless, according to 1 Chronicles 6:20-31, this lineage leads to Shimei through Samuel and his son (Joel). Despite a variant spelling in one verse, it is noteworthy that the passage regarding this family line concludes with the following: “These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD, after the ark rested there.” In other words, it seems plausible that this group played an important cultic function during the second temple period (1 Chr 16:31).

This entire passage (12:12-14) takes great care to mention the women of each of these four groups as part of this formal list of Jerusalem leaders. This emphasis on the women as well as men is largely unparalleled in Old Testament texts and has been explained in various ways. Some have interpreted the listing of the women as evidence that men and women mourned separately, but this is a minority position.¹⁰ Rather, most note the prominence of groups of women in the mourning rituals in the ancient Near East in general, meaning essentially that the repetitive mention of women in the context of groups mourning emphasizes the mourning itself.¹¹ (Women as professional mourners appear in Old Testament texts in Jer 9:17-26 [MT 9:16-25]; Ezek 32:16; 2 Chr 35:25.)¹²

CONNECTIONS

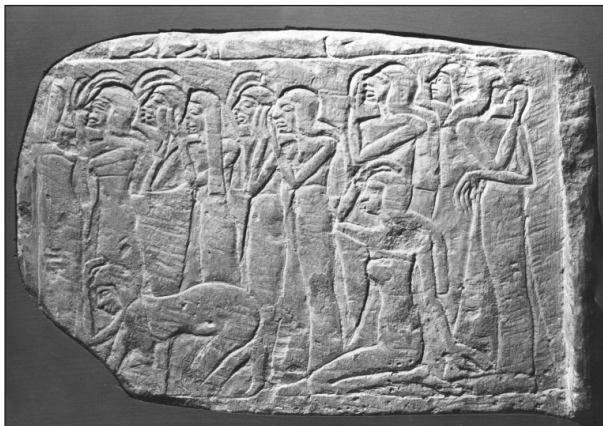
Why do the leaders of Jerusalem and its inhabitants mourn at the end of this chapter? The text does not identify the reason precisely, but it does assume the reader knows. Perhaps the best explanation lies in the ambiguity of two plural verbs in 12:10: “look on” and “pierce.” Assuming that the subject of both verbs refers to the same group, two radically different interpretations of the subject are possible. If the subject refers to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, then the picture appears to be quite remarkable. This antecedent

would mean that the victors of the eschatological battle are lamenting over their fallen enemies. What an image this would be, indeed! It would assume that once Jerusalem and Judah were attacked, and YHWH fought on their behalf, the people of God would actually lament over those who had been killed in battle.

But the alternative appears equally remarkable. If the subject of the two plural verbs is the subject from 12:9, then the group assumed would be all the nations that came against Jerusalem. In this case, the assumption would be that once these nations realize they are fighting against YHWH and YHWH’s army, they will realize what they have done and repent of their animosity and hostility. Further, this verse would then assume that the spirit of compassion and supplication poured out on the leaders and inhabitants of Jerusalem by YHWH would lead to the elimination of enmity between nations. The mourning would then be a kind of ceremonial act.

A third possibility exists, namely that the subject of the two verbs is different. One could interpret the “looking” as the actions of the leadership and citizenry of Jerusalem while interpreting the ones doing the stabbing as the nations. Such changing of antecedents for verbs without restating the subject is not typical syntax, but neither would it be unique. In this case, the picture at the end of this

Women Mourners



In the ancient world, women performed as mourners for the funeral, as judged by several ancient monuments. From this New Kingdom Egyptian relief (probably from 1319–1204 BCE), one sees women of different ages in a funeral procession, throwing dust on their head and prostrating themselves.

Relief of Mourning Women, ca. 1319–1204 BCE. Limestone. (Credit: Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 37.31E. Creative Commons-BY-NC)

chapter would be that of the battle's aftermath, when the wounded are treated and the dead buried. Syntactical problems aside, this image would also not really explain the need for God to pour out compassion and supplication.

If one had to choose between these possibilities, one is hard pressed to find reasons for selecting one group over the other. But must one really choose? This composition seems to be designed to depict a series of events that lead to hope for an eschatological dream. Yet the battle that ends in victory results in mourning by the victors. There is no cry for vengeance, no rejoicing over the destruction of the enemy, and no celebration of victory. What a way to end a war!

What if this ancient eschatological vision could be realized in our day? Amid the anxieties of life when enemies threaten peace all around, who will take the chance to change the cycle of violence? How many bodies will it take before the *victor* realizes that the cost of enemy blood is too high? [*Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*] Clearly, this passage does not offer the message “to the victor goes the spoils.” Rather, this passage depicts compassion as recognizing what others have paid for attaining “victory.” Peace is an elusive term. In the aftermath of the events of 9-11, this country became more concerned with the need for protection. Its policy makers took the battle overseas to keep it from coming to our shores. Simultaneously, decisions were made to prohibit pictures of fallen soldiers from being published, and journalists were barred from taking pictures of flag-draped coffins returning from the battlefield. At the same time, certain web sites and foreign news agencies had no qualms about showing the dead and dying in the aftermath of battle. Both sides were aware of the power of such photos. Both sides tried to sway public opinion. This chapter in Zechariah offers another “image” to consider. It powerfully conveys a sense of the futility of violence as a means of solving societal conflicts. In the aftermath of conflagration, the winners lose. There are no winners in such battles, especially if compassion for the wounded, the maimed, and the dead on both sides of the battle is swept aside. War may be inevitable given the human condition, but Zechariah 12 paints a picture of the human toll and presents a haunting image in which it is difficult to distinguish the victor from the fallen.

"Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

The haunting melody that accompanies the lyrics to "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" adds to the pathos of the song made famous by Peter, Paul and Mary in the early 1960s. The words by Pete Seeger cause one to explore the futility of war by asking how high is its cost.

Where have all the flowers gone?
 Long time passing
 Where have all the flowers gone?
 Long time ago
 Where have all the flowers gone?
 Gone to young girls every one
 When will they ever learn?
 When will they ever learn?

In subsequent verses, the young girls grow up to take husbands; the husbands become soldiers; and the soldiers go to their graves,

Where have all the graveyards gone?
 Long time passing
 Where have all the graveyards gone?
 Long time ago
 Where have all the graveyards gone?
 Gone to flowers every one
 When will we ever learn?
 When will we ever learn?

Words and music by Pete Seeger, 1961 (renewed), Fall River Music Inc.

NOTES

1. The verb "founded" does appear in other contexts that describe creation (e.g., Job 38:4; Pss 24:2; 78:69; Amos 9:6), not all of which are literarily dependent on Gen 1. Thus, one cannot say with absolute certainty that Gen 1 is part of the source of this allusion, but it does have a high probability.

2. The phrase appears at the beginning of 12:3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, and twice in 12:8.

3. Examples include the RSV and NRSV; see also Paul D. Hanson, *Dawn of the Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 361.

4. Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday 1993) 319–21.

5. *Ibid.*, 323–24.

6. No information exists for a Davidide governor except for Zerubbabel.

7. See a more detailed explanation of these possibilities in Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 343–44. Redditt sees the reference to the weeping for Hadad-Rimmon as being akin to the mourning ritual over the vegetation goddess (Tammuz) noted in Ezek 8:14 (Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: Based on the Revised Standard Version* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 133).

8. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 343–44; David Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 122. Petersen links Zech 12:11 with the postexilic lamentations of Josiah mentioned in 2 Chr 35:25.

9. See the discussion in Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 16–22, and especially the chart on page 19 listing the Davidides who are named in various sources up to the second half of the fifth century. They likely continue to play a leadership role in the community, though in sources available at this point no other persons are specifically linked to the Davidic family by name.

10. So Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco: Word books, 1984) 277.

11. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 346.

12. For other examples of monumental evidence, see Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 346.

CLEANSING, JUDGING, DELIVERING

Zechariah 13:1-9

COMMENTARY

Three thematic units comprise the chapter: 13:1, 2-6, 7-9. Precisely how this chapter as a whole relates to its broader context, however, is a matter of debate.¹ What is not debated is the recognition that the units within these chapters overlap thematically with one another and serve to develop themes of judgment and repentance. Like the previous chapter, Zechariah 13:1 begins with an eschatological “on that day” formula, but its theme of the cleansing of the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem seems more designed to close off the material from Zechariah 12 (and the mourning of the house of David). Zechariah 13:2-6, on the other hand, pronounces judgment on a group of prophets whose integrity it questions. Thus, whereas the concluding verses of Zechariah 12 focus on the change of heart exhibited by the houses of David, Nathan, Levi, and the people of Jerusalem, Zechariah 13:2-6 turns its focus to the prophets. In contrast to the house of David, which is depicted as being cleansed and purified (13:1), 13:2-6 offers no hope to the prophets. The final unit, Zechariah 13:7-9, functions as a poetic transition by eliciting images from Zechariah 11–13 and subtly anticipating material in the collection that follows in Zechariah 14. In so doing, these three verses prepare the reader for an extended exploration of the fate of the remnant on the day of YHWH.

From Mourning to Cleansing, 13:1

The chapter begins with the first of three “on that day” formulas. The formula does two things simultaneously. First, it underscores that the events to follow will take place in the future. Second, it ties these future events to the ongoing parade of events that will happen “on

that day,” as in other sayings in Zechariah 12–14. The three occurrences of this formula in Zechariah 13 (13:1, 2, 4) are couched between seven other occurrences in chapters 12 (12:3, 4, 6, 8 [2x], 9, 11) and 14 (14:4, 6, 8, 9, 13, 20, 21). Clearly, these chapters offer a composite collection with a decidedly eschatological character.

Zechariah 13:1 anticipates the opening of a fountain for cleansing the house of David and the populace of Jerusalem. Given that these two groups represent the groups that have exhibited mourning in the preceding verses, it seems plausible that the two actions are connected in the minds of the editor/author who compiled these sayings (see 12:10). The fountain in all likelihood refers to a fountain in the temple that has cultic and ritual significance. This fountain’s purpose would be to cleanse those returning from a foreign land whose exposure to idols would have made these people unclean and unfit to enter the temple, as one can readily see from a passage like Ezekiel 36:22-25. Such ritual cleansing could well be a logical consequence of the mourning of the leadership and the inhabitants of Jerusalem depicted in 12:10-14. This conceptual link helps to explain why some treat 13:1 as the logical, if not original, ending to Zechariah 12.

Zechariah 13:1 does not state why the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem need cleansing from sin and impurity. Meyers and Meyers offer four reasons why accusations are lacking in this verse.² First, the eschatological orientation of this oracle suspends the normal expectations for order in human affairs. Second, one can interpret the grief and mourning from Zechariah 12 as related to confrontation over sin committed. Third, the purification in 13:1 comes from the waters, not the animal sacrifice normally associated with *ḥaṭṭāʾt*. Fourth, the editor/author could have assumed punishment had already occurred with the loss of the monarchy. In this sense, then, eschatological restoration has to do with the broader understanding of Israel and Judah’s history, not merely an isolated event in the Persian period.

The End of Idolatry, Prophets, and an Unclean Spirit, 13:2-6

Zechariah 13:2-6 offers one of the most scathing denunciations of prophets in the entire Old Testament, comparing prophecy to the worship of idols and its practitioners as worthy of death. [Denouncing Prophets] Following the second “on that day” formula, Zechariah

13:2 articulates judgment against three entities by announcing the removal of idolatry, prophets, and an unclean spirit from the land.

Interestingly, the judgment in the first half of 13:2 does not announce the removal of idols but the removal of “the names of idols.” This distinction emphasizes subtly the theological problem that idolatry posed. Read against the anti-idol polemic of texts such as Isaiah 44:9-20, and against the name theology of such texts, one can ascertain the thought pattern. **[Name Theology]** It is not the idols themselves, absurd as they are, but the *worship* of them that elicits the condemnation. Moreover, the covenant people should call on the name of YHWH, not the name of some other deity. Thus, by removing the names of idols, this verse does not merely call for their physical destruction. Rather, it anticipates a time when other deities will not be worshiped or called on in times of need. In short, 13:2 assumes people in the eschatological future will act in ways that they did not act at the beginning of the Book of the Twelve: they will no longer remember the names of other deities but will call on YHWH by name. Thus, Zechariah 13:2a essentially parallels Hosea 2:17 (MT 2:19), except the former refers to idols and the latter refers to Baal: “For I will remove the names of the baals from her mouth, and their name will not be remembered any longer.” In actuality, Zechariah 13:2-9 modifies and reiterates many of the images of Hosea 2:15-23 (MT 2:17-25).

The second half of 13:2 associates the prophets with the unclean spirit. Their removal is portrayed as the goal of YHWH, along with eliminating the worship of idols. These two items must be interrelated in the mind of the prophet relating this message. In short, it is not all prophets, just those associated with the unclean spirit and idolatry, who are the object of this warning. One is tempted to

Denouncing Prophets



Several texts in the Hebrew Bible warn of harsh consequences when speaking inappropriately in the name of a deity. Such condemnation typically resolves around one of two issues: limiting prophetic pronouncements to those uttered in the name of YHWH and the veracity of the proclamation. Prophets speaking in the name of a deity other than YHWH should immediately be challenged or terminated (e.g., prophets of Baal in Jer 23:13; 1 Kgs 18). By contrast, prophets speaking in the name of YHWH whose pronouncements do not come to pass can mislead the people. They are confronted (often just as vehemently) for uttering such misleading prophecies (see the story of Hananiah in Jer 28). Prescriptions against both kinds of activity appear in the Torah, which condemns both those speaking on behalf of other deities (Deut 13:1-5; 18:15-20) and those not speaking correctly for YHWH (Deut 18:21-22; Jer 14:13-14). On the other hand, genuine prophets speaking genuine messages on behalf of YHWH are often called on to speak truth against those in power; not surprisingly, they are likely to meet resistance. Such resistance also takes the form of denunciations against genuine prophets. Jeremiah is imprisoned for speaking against the king. Amos is confronted by the chief priest for prophesying for money. Hence, discerning genuine words from God from the words of prophets working from their own agendas has always been a problem. For further reading, especially on places where this rhetoric appears, see David L. Petersen, “Prophecy, False,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 4:620–21.

Name Theology



Beginning in Deut 12, the centralization of the temple becomes a major recurring motif easily recognizable by reference to the “choosing” of one place for YHWH’s “name” to dwell. This idiom appears in various iterations in Deuteronomy (12:5, 11, 21; 14:23f; 16:2, 6, 11; 18:5; 21:5; 26:2), Kings (1 Kgs 8:16, 44, 48; 11:36; 14:21; 18:25; 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:27), and parallels to the Kings texts in Chronicles (2 Chr 6:5-6, 34, 38; 7:16; 12:13; 33:7). It also plays a significant role in the temple theology in Nehemiah (1:9). It becomes an idiom that refers to the presence of YHWH in the temple, and may well have played a significant role in the aniconic tradition of early Judaism. Forbidding the worship of/with idols set the religious expression of Israel apart from the religious expression of its neighbors in the ancient Near East. The loss of the ark of the covenant after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem meant that the inner sanctum of the temple (the holy of holies) would have no talisman of any kind. Reference to the name of YHWH could also connote identity as YHWH’s people (Amos 9:12) as well as the place of the temple itself (Jer 7:10).

assume that this message is delivered from the outside looking in. In other words, the representative of one prophetic group is castigating another group, whose characteristics are detailed in 13:3-6. The group of prophets to whom this passage is directed can apparently be recognized by their practices. When they speak officially, they wear a hairy mantle (13:4), and their bodies bear the marks of flagellation (13:6). In addition, the speaker assumes that this group prophesies for financial gain (see discussion of 13:5).

Zechariah 13:3 utters a curse against prophets, though it likely intends false prophets (see [Denouncing Prophets]). The curse functions as an admonition and a warning. By commanding the death of prophets at the hands of their parents, it raises the level of seriousness for speaking in the name of YHWH. This curse calls to mind the legal formulation in Deuteronomy 18:18-22,

which does three things: (1) it commands the people of Israel to pay attention to prophets anointed by YHWH; (2) it condemns any prophet speaking in the name of a deity other than YHWH; and 3) it condemns any prophet who speaks in the name of YHWH when the prophet has not been commanded to speak. In short, prophets are required to speak the word of YHWH, not words of their own choosing. Deuteronomy 18:18-22 does not specify the death penalty for those who disobey, but Zechariah 13:3 represents an interpretation of these commands—specifically, that this prophetic crime is punishable by death.

The immediate context (13:2-6) anticipates a future where the false prophets (13:4) will be ashamed of their behavior, and this context implies an eschatological vision of a future that is different from the present. In that future, deceptive prophecies will no longer exist. That future portrays an eschatological ideal of what these prophets will say in the time of cleansing and restoration (13:5). It has been noted that Zechariah 13:5 alludes to Amos 7:14, but the reason for this allusion frequently eludes comment. The allusion presupposes a critique of the practice of prophesying

for money. Such is the context of Amos 7:14, where Amaziah, the chief priest at Bethel, accuses Amos of trying to earn money in the northern kingdom by prophesying (see Amos 7:12). In response, Amos denies that he needs the money by stating he has two jobs as a “herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). Zechariah 13:5 anticipates that in the time of purification, these professional prophets will make their living farming their own land rather than making their living by speaking on God’s behalf, if one pays them to do so. By offering prophecies for hire, such professional prophets would open themselves to dangers of speaking what they think their customers want to hear. [Professional Prophets] Satisfied customers pay more, and they tell their friends. By contrast, 13:2–6 assumes that God decides if and when to communicate through prophets and that consulting God certainly does not involve calling on idols (13:2). Further, the concept of the land being “my possession since my youth” implies that the prophet will no longer earn a livelihood by selling visions but by working the land of his inheritance.

In order to interpret 13:6, one must make certain assumptions. Frequently, the response of the prophets who are confronted in 13:6 is interpreted as a subterfuge to hide the cause of their scars.³ The prophets’ response, according to this line of interpretation, implicitly denies that the wounds come from flagellation or beatings that marked the actions of these false prophets. Rather, so this interpretation reasons, these prophets are claiming that the marks on their bodies are the result of an accident in the house of a friend. Such an interpretation, however, leaves unanswered questions so that a careful reader would recognize the excuse as a lie. Why, for example, would this response satisfy the interrogator? It also does not explain the use of the plural “wounds” in 13:6. What kind of event would account for multiple bodily injuries in a friend’s house?

The word “wounds” derives from the verbal root *nkh*, which means to strike. The word translated as “friends” (NRSV, NIV, KJV) is a piel participle from the verbal root *ʕb*, meaning to love. The form in Zechariah 13:6 is more literally translated “my lovers.” Some commentators, thus, see this statement as a confession of “illicit sexual activity” or self-mutilation to draw blood as part of

Professional Prophets



Prophets associated with cultic sites were open to the charge of prophesying for money. From early on in the ancient Near East, cultic officials included prophets, meaning that rhetorical diatribe against such officials can be found in various places. See [Prophets and Kings at Mari] and [Prophet, Shepherd, Tender of Trees] in Amos 7.

the prophetic process (see 1 Kgs 18:28).⁴ Nevertheless, particularly after the allusion to Amos 7:14 in the preceding verse, one can hardly help wondering whether the phrase “house of my lovers” would not best be understood as a figurative allusion to idolaters such as the lovers in Hosea 2:5-13 (MT 2:7-15). There, references to my lovers and her lovers refer to the worship of deities other than YHWH. If this is the meaning of “my lovers” in Zechariah 13:6, then the response of these prophets functions more as a confession of past wrongs than a dodge of their interrogators as many typically interpret the verse. In this sense, it would be understood as part of the ideal future. In either case, no response to the confession, or the lie, is recounted. Zechariah 13:6 simply ends the denunciation of prophets abruptly.

A Remnant Will Survive, 13:7-9

Zechariah 13 concludes by (1) recalling the shepherd imagery of Zechariah 11 and the castigation of leadership in Zechariah 12:1–13:6 and (2) anticipating the remnant motif associated with the day of YHWH in Zechariah 14. Whereas 13:7-9 has often been treated as the original ending to the shepherd allegory of 11:4-17, a number of recent studies suggest this was not the case. Rather, the studies have focused on connections between these three verses and Zechariah 11–14. Essentially, the connections in these verses suggest 13:7-9 functions as a kind of editorial transition to Zechariah 14, but the transition is also cognizant of its position within the Book of the Twelve and the developing prophetic canon.⁵

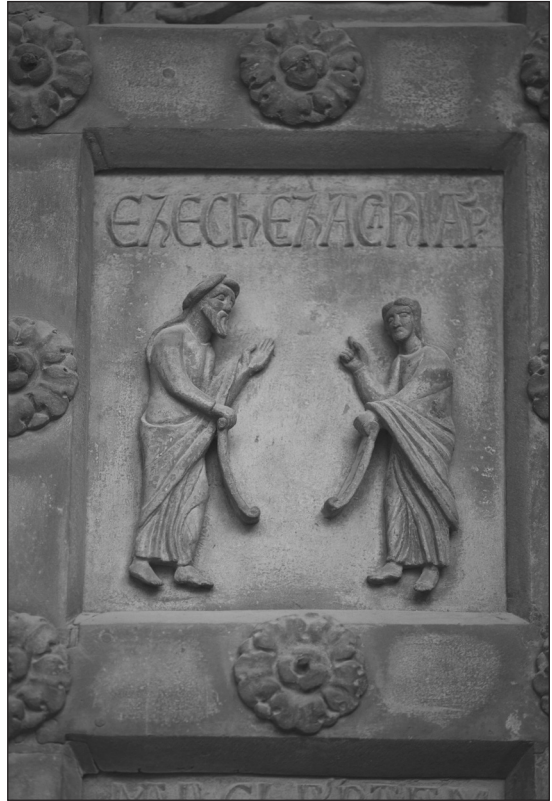
Zechariah 13:7 draws primarily on the imagery of the wicked shepherd in 11:4-17 who will be struck with the sword. While 11:17 depicts the severe wounding of the shepherd, 13:7 seems to imply he will receive a mortal blow from the sword of YHWH. The language “my shepherd” and “my associate” provides considerable irony in this text. The striking of the shepherd leads to the scattering of the sheep and in turn to YHWH’s punishment against them.

Zechariah 13:8, like 11:4-17, adapts imagery from Ezekiel (specifically, Ezek 5) in dividing the population into thirds, allowing for a remnant of only one third to survive. That surviving remnant will be further tested and refined like metal. These three

verses portray a process of the punishment of leadership (i.e., the monarchy) and the people after the shepherd is removed. Two thirds of the flock will be destroyed, while the remainder will face severe trials.

Zechariah 13:9 offers an allusion that has literary, canonical, and theological relevance. Literarily, while 13:7-8 draws from images in Ezekiel and Zechariah (11:4-17 and 13:2-6 specifically), Zechariah 13:9 anticipates the surviving remnant motif of Zechariah 14. This literary anticipation helps one understand 13:7-9 as a redactional transition *from* the judgment against the leaders and the inhabitants of Judah *to* a focus on the remnant who will survive the day of YHWH. Moreover, 13:9 helps to create this transition within a canonical context by alluding to texts at the beginning and end of the Book of the Twelve. Specifically, Zechariah 13:9a draws on Malachi 3:1, while Zechariah 3:9b alludes to Hosea 2:23 (MT 2:25). [Zechariah 13:9 and the Book of the Twelve] Even the extended contexts of these two allusions provide further verbal connections since Hosea 2:18 (MT 2:20) and

Ezekiel and Zechariah



Bonanno Pisano (fl. 1174–1186). *Ezekiel and Zacharias*. Bronze relief on the main portal of the Duomo of Monreale. Romanesque, c. 1186. (Credit: Vanni/Art Resource, NY)

Zechariah 13:9 and the Book of the Twelve



Zech 13:9a: And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one *refines silver*, and *test them as gold is tested*.

Zech 13:9b: They will call on my name, and I will answer them. *I will say*, “They are my people”; and *they will say*, “The LORD is our God.”

Mal 3:2-3: But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; 3 he will sit as a *refiner and purifier of silver*, and he will *purify* the descendants of Levi and *refine them like gold and silver*, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

Hos 2:21-23 (MT 2:23-25): On that day I will *answer*, says the LORD, I will *answer* the heavens and they shall *answer* the earth; and the earth shall *answer* the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall *answer* Jezreel; and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and *I will say* to Lo-ammi, “You are my people”; and *he shall say*, “You are my God.”

Malachi 3:1 represent the first and last times in which the word “covenant” appears in the Book of the Twelve. Further, Zechariah 13:9b begins with the pronouncement “they will call on my name,” which picks up on motif of calling on YHWH in Hosea 2:16 (MT 2:18). Theologically, by combining Hosea 2:18 and Malachi 3:1, Zechariah 13:9 associates the covenant people with the surviving remnant on the day of YHWH.

CONNECTIONS

The middle unit of this chapter deals with an ironic twist that has significant implications for modern religious practice. In 13:2-6, a prophetic voice condemns prophecy and prophets. To be sure, most interpreters treat these words as the condemnation of false prophets because (1) according to 13:2 they are associated with an unclean spirit, and (2) according to 13:3 these condemned prophets have been speaking lies. Nevertheless, such polemic should provide reason for pause for all who dare to speak in the name of God. Frequently, the role of the prophet involves confrontation—whether the prophet confronts the king, priests, the people at large, or other prophets. In this sense prophets represent agents of change. They also claim that their authority to speak comes from God. What happens then when two prophets, each claiming to be the mouthpiece of God, pronounce messages diametrically opposed to one another? In other words, how does one discern a true message from God from a false message? Frequently, such issues are decided by power. One thinks of stories where prophets issued warnings to kings that were ignored because the prophet’s warning did not fit what that king wanted to do. Consider, for example, stories of Jeremiah, who frequently put his life at risk by confronting the power structures, or of the story of Micaiah (1 Kgs 22), the sole prophet who dared to tell the king that his plans for war were doomed to failure. [\[A Biblical Case Study\]](#) In such cases, might does not make right.

The confrontation in Zechariah 13:2-6 appears to have something of these elements in mind. The group being castigated is a group of prophets who clearly have their own set of traditions. Zechariah 13:4 assumes that a prophet speaking authoritatively would put on the official garments, the hairy cloaks, worn by

prophets. Zechariah 13:6 suggests that this group of prophets used flagellation to demonstrate commitment to their craft. Yet, in all likelihood, the words of these prophets carried weight for one group, while the prophet speaking in 13:2-6 represents the views of another group. One could debate which of these two prophetic groups more likely represents the official imprimatur of cultic prophets in the postexilic period, but this debate merely avoids a deeper question. How does one discern where God stands on an issue? When countries go to war, both sides often claim they are acting as God's agent. When denominations and congregations split over issues of doctrine, both sides generally claim they are acting on God's behalf. Logically, of course, unless we serve a God who enjoys confusion, both sides cannot be correct in such debates. So how does one decide who speaks for God?

This question has no easy answer, but a few questions may help illuminate some debates. First, what is really at stake? Some debates are more serious than others, and their stakes are higher. It makes a difference whether one is choosing between war and peace or whether one is arguing about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Second, whose interests are being served? When both sides claim to be acting on God's behalf, one has to take a hard look at the expected outcomes. If one side benefits economically and the other side stands to lose, then this information needs to become part of the discussion, for God rarely acts arbitrarily to benefit one group over another. Third, whose arguments best coincide with the big themes of the Bible? Notice that this question is not asking who can do a better job of proof-texting. Rather, those who claim to be people of the book need to confront themselves and their own biases, as well as those of their opponents, by asking what this issue has to say about justice, righteousness, salvation, and deliverance, and not just self-preservation. In short, we need to ask what the issue under debate has to do with love and mercy. Fourth, we need to ask, "Is there an alternative that involves compromise?" When the flames of debate are being fueled by people on both sides claiming to speak the truth of God, a group discussion may lead to polarized alternatives because people assume that God is either with one side or the other. Such assumptions are rarely accurate.

A Biblical Case Study



Jer 28 tells the story of two prophets with conflicting messages. Jeremiah and Hananiah were both considered prophets (see Jer 28:1). Both used prophetic oracular forms, and both claimed to speak for God (28:2, 10, 12). At the time, Hananiah was far more popular than Jeremiah, especially with the king. Hananiah spoke words of comfort and peace, while Jeremiah spoke words of warning and doom. In hindsight, Jeremiah proved correct, but how would people have known at the time?

NOTES

1. Many treat this chapter on its own as an independent unit, only loosely connected to its context. For example, Meyers and Meyers assume that Zechariah 13 has been linked editorially to what has preceded, and even that 13:1 “in a sense, concludes the second part of the oracular statements of 12:2-11” (Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* [AB 25C; New York: Doubleday, 1993] 362). However, Meyers and Meyers (as with other scholars) also generally treat 13:1 as a bridge with stronger links to 13:2-6. David Petersen, on the other hand, treats 13:1 as part of Zech 12, while treating 13:2-6, 7-9 as appendages to that unit (*Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995] 109). Paul L. Redditt sees all of 12:10–13:9 as a supplement to 12:1-9 created by a redactor using preexisting source material and the redactor’s own composition to challenge the leading families of Jerusalem (12:10–13:1), false prophets (13:2-6), and a shepherd (13:7-9) to repent (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 132).

2. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 365.

3. Ibid., 383–84.

4. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 127.

5. For a more detailed development of this model, see James D. Nogalski, “Zechariah 13.7-9 as a Redactional Text: an Appreciation and Re-evaluation of the Work of Rex Mason,” in *Bringing out the Treasure: Inner Biblical Allusion in Zechariah 9–14* (ed. Mark J. Boda and Michael H. Floyd; JSOTSup 370; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 292–304.

THE DAY OF YHWH REVISITED

Zechariah 14:1-21

COMMENTARY

How one interprets the character of Zechariah 14, like most of Zechariah 9–14 and prophetic literature in general, affects how one understands the relationship of the individual units within the chapter.¹ At least two basic approaches to this question can be found among scholars. On the one hand, some commentators treat Zechariah 14 as a unified composition from the hand of single author.² On the other hand, various commentators suggest that the entire chapter represents a collection of more or less independent sayings from anonymous figures grouped here because of their thematic similarity.³ In this latter case, however, most understand the groupings of these units to convey some kind of coherence and/or progression, as well as points of comparison with the material in 12:1–13:6. Recent discussions have also demonstrated thematic similarities with the beginning and end of Isaiah. [Zechariah 14 and Isaiah]

One may actually find more compatibility between these two models than is evident at first glance by combining the insights of David L. Petersen and Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers. Petersen is more careful and convincing in his delineation of the units themselves, while Meyers and Meyers offer significant

Zechariah 14 and Isaiah



E. Bosshard-Nepustil, R. G. Kratz, and O. H. Steck have made an important case that demonstrates a close connection between Zech 14 and Isa 66 as part of a larger connection between Zech 9–14 and later redactions of Isaiah. Steck refers to Isa 66 as the model text for Zech 14. Bosshard-Nepustil and Kratz document the similarities in conjunction with Malachi. The similarities have to do with the dual nature of the attack on Jerusalem that leads to its purification and its centrality in a new world order. Several of the similarities they notice also apply to the beginning of Isaiah (especially 1:7-9, 24-28; 2:1-4). The connections linking Isa 66 with Isa 1–2 have recently been noted on several fronts (see J. D. Nogalski). In essence, then, Zech 14 appears to exhibit a canon consciousness that draws on the beginning and end of Isaiah for its thematic topoi.

Odil Hannes Steck, *Der Abschluß der Prophetie im Alten Testament. Ein Versuch zur Frage der Vorgeschichte des Kanons* (Biblical Theologische Studien 17; Neukirchener Verlag, 1991) 43; Erich Bosshard and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, "Maleachi im Zwölfprophetenbuch," *Biblische Notizen* 52 (1990): 44–45; James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAV 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 242–44; and James D. Nogalski, "Zechariah 13:7-9: An Appreciation and Re-evaluation of the Work of Rex Mason," in *Bringing out the Treasure: Inner Biblical Allusion in Zechariah 9–14* (ed. Mark J. Bodé; JSOT Supplement Series 370; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2003) 301–304.

insights into the thematic relationships between these units. Moreover, while Petersen understands this montage to include eleven different units (1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8, 9, 10-11, 12, 13-14, 15, 16-19, 20-21), Meyers and Meyers group these eleven units into only four thematic units (1-5, 6-11, 12-15, 16-21). The first and third groups in Meyers and Meyers's breakdown focus on YHWH's protection of Jerusalem from military threat, and the second and fourth groups accentuate the radical change of the world and its environment as a means of provision and purification for Jerusalem. Both Petersen and Meyers and Meyers note that while there are some major points of disjuncture, one can also see a type of progression present in the chapter. This progression must be the result of the arrangement and compilation process, not the narrative movement of a single author creating a unified text from scratch. In the end, Petersen offers the helpful characterization of this chapter as a montage. However, one need not share his reluctance in speaking of one unit building on another in terms of the overall effect on the reader. In short, this amalgamation of diverse units reflects both different presuppositions and a progression of thought that, while not narratively consistent, can be seen as literarily coherent.

Battles on the Day of YHWH, 14:1-5

The first thematic block (14:1-5) depicts the day of YHWH as a battle involving Jerusalem and the nations. Nevertheless, the cause of the battle differs between the two sections; the first section presumes YHWH himself gathers nations for judgment against Jerusalem (14:1-2), while the second depicts YHWH battling the nations on Jerusalem's behalf (14:3-5).

Zechariah 14:1-3. This first segment of the chapter announces several important motifs for Zechariah 14. These motifs include the coming day of YHWH, the battle between YHWH and the nations, and the restoration of Jerusalem. As well, the unique formulation for the day of YHWH (14:1) provides the thematic focus for the entire chapter. Most of the remaining units within the chapter will use the eschatological formula "on that day" to refer to this day of YHWH and its implications, all of which are presumed to lie in the future. "On that day" appears seven times in this chapter (14:4, 6, 8, 9, 13, 20, 21), and the emphatic role of this

phrase is further accentuated by the fact that it is the last phrase of the book.

The second half of 14:1 lays the groundwork for the theme of the future restoration of Jerusalem by recognizing implicitly that the city will be plundered. It is possible to understand this plundering as a metaphorical statement indicating that the city has never recovered entirely from its destruction in 587 BCE. Or one can interpret the attack as the events that inaugurate the radical transformation of the future. At any rate, in contrast to the optimistic hopes with which the book of Zechariah began, Zechariah 14:1 (like Zech 12) anticipates a military invasion of Jerusalem as part of the coming day of YHWH.

The next verse delineates the nature of the attack. “All the nations” will attack and defeat Jerusalem at the behest of YHWH (“I will gather . . . the city will be taken”). Description of the defeat shows the brutality of war—which sadly has changed little in the millennia since this Scripture was written—that involves increasingly personal savageries: the city will be taken, houses looted, and women raped. The decisiveness of the victory is palpable: of those not killed in battle, half will be taken into exile. Thus, in retrospect, one sees in 14:2 a decidedly different formulation about the effects of the battle when compared to the formulations in 13:8-9, the previous unit. While 13:8-9 anticipates judgment from YHWH that will kill two thirds of the inhabitants, with only one third of the population surviving (and that third will be further tested), the formulations in 14:2 speak of two distinct halves, not thirds: those exiled and those not cut off.⁴

Surprisingly, Zechariah 14:3 changes direction rather dramatically from the decimation of Jerusalem to YHWH’s entry into the battle against the very nations whom YHWH gathered (according to 14:2). It introduces the motif of YHWH as warrior fighting on behalf of YHWH’s own people. By presenting the sequence in this way, YHWH’s role as instigator of the attack becomes subsumed under the portrayal of YHWH as defender of Jerusalem. Once YHWH enters the fray, the outcome of the battle can hardly result in Jerusalem’s defeat. Of course, the ultimate fate of Jerusalem leaves loose ends compared with 14:1-2: namely, why did YHWH initiate the battle against Jerusalem by gathering the nations against it? And why did God allow Jerusalem to be so devastated if the goal all along was to defeat the nations?

The Warrior YHWH



When deities battle humans, it is hardly a fair fight in the conceptual world of the ancient Near East. The depiction of YHWH appearing for battle and stomping on a mountain in Zech 14:3-4 calls to mind images of deities such as in [Imagery of the Two Mountains]. Of importance in that image is the scale of the deity. Conceptually, deities were frequently depicted as far larger than the mountains on earth. Several Old Testament texts share this perspective of scale. See, for example, Isa 66:1: “The heavens are my throne and earth is my footstool, what is the house that you would build for me?”

ANEP, 683.

Zechariah 14:4-5. Whereas 14:3 announces YHWH’s arrival for battle, Zechariah 14:4 depicts the warrior YHWH in monumental terms. [The Warrior YHWH] As in other prophetic theophanies, the appearance of YHWH on earth creates seismic problems for the earth, which is unable to withstand YHWH’s presence. For example, in the theophany that opens Micah (1:2-7), YHWH strides across the mountains, but these mountains melt like wax because YHWH’s massive presence overwhelms anything it touches on the earth.

A similar picture operates in the anthropomorphic imagery in Zechariah 14:4. When YHWH’s feet step on the Mount of Olives, the mountain splits in two, leaving a wide valley where the mountain had been and causing the rest of the mountain to move in opposite directions. [The Mount of Olives] As such, the image presumes a grand sense of proportion; not unlike the image of a person stomping on a sand castle on the beach, the mountain simply collapses beneath the weight of YHWH.

Logically, the description of YHWH’s appearance in 14:4 makes sense following the announcement in 14:3 that YHWH will go forth and fight against those nations. The effects of YHWH’s appearance in 14:4-5, however, create an escape route for YHWH’s people that would hardly be necessary if the battle were already finished as 14:2 implies. Nevertheless, the eschatological formula “on that day” formally connects the action of YHWH’s appearance with the day of YHWH in 14:1-2. The appearance of “on that day” provides the first of seven instances (14:4, 6, 8, 9, 13, 20, 21) where this term appears in Zechariah 14. It functions as a major *Leitmotif*, providing both a future orientation and connective tissue linking the diverse sayings within the chapter. In short, despite the tensions, the editor compiling the sayings in this chapter wants them to be interpreted in light of one another, as part of the same eschatological battle.

The depiction of flight (14:5) ties directly to YHWH’s appearance, which simultaneously transforms the topography around Jerusalem, thus providing an escape route for the people. The location of Azal is a matter of speculation, though Meyers and Meyers relate it to the Beth-Azal in Micah 1:11, treating it not as a ficti-

The Mount of Olives



The Mount of Olives refers to the mountain ridge east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. This particular phrase appears only here in the Hebrew Bible, but this “mountain,” nevertheless, plays a significant role. At its base, one finds the spring of Gihon that provided fresh water. It is the place where David weeps after Absalom’s rebellion (2 Sam 15:30-32) and the site where high places were built to accommodate the wives of



Mount of Olives. (Credit: Jim Pitts)

Solomon and other foreign worshipers (1 Kgs 11:7-8). It is also the site to which the “glory of YHWH” withdraws in the book of Ezekiel (11:23) to signify that YHWH’s protection has been withdrawn from Jerusalem.

The Mount of Olives also plays a significant role in a series of Gospel texts that allude to Zechariah texts, suggesting that eschatological traditions may have accumulated around this mountain in early Christian communities. First, nearing the Mount of Olives, Jesus sends disciples to retrieve the animal he will ride on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (cf. Mark 11:1; Matt 21:1; Luke 19:9). Each Gospel author uses allusions that seem to evoke the scene in Zech 9:9 (though only Matthew makes explicit reference to Zechariah). Next, immediately after the last supper Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives to await his betrayal, even citing Zech 13:7 in the process (Mark 14:26-27; Matt 26:30-31; cf. Luke 22:39-40). Finally, though more oblique, when at the Mount of Olives, Jesus warns his disciples not to be misled concerning eschatological expectations, where the language of earthquakes and famine perhaps echoes Zech 14 (Mark 13:3-8; Matt 24:3-8).

tious name but as an actual place.⁵ The association of the theophany with the earthquake in the days of Uzziah both draws on traditions that appear in the book of Amos (and perhaps Isa 6) and goes beyond those traditions. [The Earthquake in the Days of Uzziah] Neither Amos nor Isaiah refer to the aftermath of the earthquake; Zechariah 14:5, on the other hand, implies specific traditions about the flight of people away from the epicenter of the earthquake to which we no longer have access in literary form.

The Re-creation of the Land, 14:6-11

The second thematic block (14:6-11) conveys four radical changes in the landscape of Judah and Jerusalem in two sections (14:6-8, 10-11), which in turn frame the two statements in 14:9 that affirm YHWH’s sovereignty and universal kingship. The fact that these radical changes affect the re-creation of the land, and that they are

The Earthquake in the Days of Uzziah



The superscription in Amos 1:1 places the prophets in the reign of “Uzziah king of Judah.” It also contains a reference that sets the message of the prophet “two years before the earthquake.” This phrase has often been taken to signify an early collection of the prophet’s writings, since it assumes the reader knows what earthquake is intended during the reign of Uzziah. Some have also suggested that the language of the fifth vision (Zech 9:1-4) could be read as anticipating an earthquake destroying the temple of the northern kingdom. Less clear is the call story of Isa 6, wherein a

reference to “the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1) combined with the “shaking of the thresholds” (6:4) has given cause for some to associate this language with a powerful earthquake. Such deductions seem unwarranted, however, when one considers the following: (1) shaking commonly appears in contexts of theophany; (2) the vision in this report describes the heavenly realm not earthly realia; (3) and the reference to the earthquake in Amos 1:1 does not connect the earthquake with Uzziah’s death.

placed after the battle scenes, strongly suggests that these changes should be interpreted as consequences of the grand battle on the day of YHWH in the previous section (14:1-5).

Zechariah 14:6-8. Zechariah 14:6 presents the first of four radical changes that alter the landscape of Jerusalem and Judah into an idyllic paradise that no longer faces the agricultural threats so typical for this region. [Radical Changes on the Day of YHWH] The anticipation of a world without cold does not merely bespeak an image of

Radical Changes on the Day of YHWH



C. L. Meyers and E. M. Meyers point out that in Zech 14:6-14 one finds a radically new Jerusalem and Judah depicted in four notable areas affecting the “agrarian ideal” of Judah: climate, luminescence, water source, and topography. Zech 14:6 speaks of the elimination of the kind of cold-producing frost that frequently affected the agricultural cycle, especially in Judah. Next, Zech 14:7 envisions a world of continuous light, eliminating the longer, darker days of winter when things would not grow. Zech 14:8 then anticipates living waters flowing from the temple to water the region, eliminating the problems associated with the lack of rain or the timing of rain during the growing season. Finally, Zech 14:10 imagines a valley coming into being to replace the mountainous terrain from Geba to Rimmon, transforming land too difficult to farm into verdant soil. The picture that develops from these accumulated images represents a re-envisioning of Judah’s ability not only to sustain population but also to provide an idealized portrait of a land of plenty. In a land where the agrarian cycle was a continual challenge, the appeal of such a utopian vision can hardly be overstated.

See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (AB 25C; New York: Doubleday 1993) 432–42.

convenience. To be sure, winter nights in the ancient world of Judah were no picnic, but given the remainder of the units in this passage, the greater danger posed by cold and frost is the effect on the agricultural products of Judah. One night of frost can kill or radically limit produce for an entire season, creating famine in days to come. In the world envisioned by Zechariah 14, the day of YHWH will create a Judah that faces no such natural calamity.

The introduction of continual light constitutes the second radical change, and it works on at least two levels: the semantic and the allusive. First, 14:7 depicts a time of continuous daylight. Meyers and Meyers correctly associate these radical changes with creating the structures whereby the agricultural production will be enhanced exponentially.⁶ These changes are not, however, limited to agricultural concerns. It is easy in our modern world to overlook the societal changes provided by

electricity and modern power. For example, in the ancient world the difference between daylight and darkness also had to do with mobility and security. Cities in the ancient world had no street-lights, leaving those caught in the darkness at risk of attack. As well, those in the field would also be subject to dangers from wild animals. This continuous light conveys an image that ancient hearers would have found both appealing and unfathomable.

Second, the unusual phrasing of 14:7 evokes the language of Genesis 1, the Priestly creation story, but this allusive quality is hard to convey in translation. The phrase, translated as “continuous day” in the NRSV, in actuality mimics the language of Genesis 1:5 and would be literally translated “day one” (though this would be syntactically cumbersome in English). Also, while Genesis 1:5 describes the past (“and *there was* evening, and *there was* morning, day one”), Zechariah 14:7 anticipates a time in the future in a way that strains syntax to such a degree that one can hardly miss the allusion to Genesis 1:5 (“and there *shall be* day one”). Further, Zechariah 14:7 also uses the other keywords in Genesis 1:5 (“day,” “night,” “evening,” “light”), with the exception of “darkness” for obvious reasons. By alluding to the first day of creation, Zechariah 14:7 envisions nothing less than a re-creation of the world without darkness. **[Creation Story Allusions]**

In Zechariah 14:8, one encounters a third radical change bettering the agricultural cycle. The description begins with the third eschatological “on that day” formula in this chapter, emphasizing its future orientation and the changing of topics within this passage. The picture of living waters flowing from Jerusalem to the eastern and western seas involves several conceptual perspectives. First, the living waters denote fresh water, and the fact that the water comes from Jerusalem ties it to the image of an ever-flowing fountain within the temple area—an image that appears in at least two other prophetic texts: Joel 4:18 (MT 3:18) and Ezekiel 47:12. Of course, this language is highly symbolic. Simultaneously, Zechariah 14:8 conceptualizes this fountain on a scale grand enough to water the entire land. The eastern and western sea refers to the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean, respectively. The image of a freshwater

Creation Story Allusions



Like Zeph 1:2-3 and Zech 12:1, Zech 14:7 draws on the Priestly creation story by means of easily recognizable allusions, but for different reasons. Zech 12:1 draws on both creation stories to accentuate YHWH's power as creator, while Zeph 1:2-3 alludes to the created beings of the Priestly creation story in reverse order to convey the ensuing judgment of Judah and Jerusalem as the undoing of creation (see commentary). By contrast, Zech 14:7 alludes to the first day of creation in order to anticipate a re-creation of a world without darkness, in which the *restoration* of Jerusalem and Judah serves as the central focus. While one might be hard-pressed to make the case that Zech 14 *deliberately* alludes to Gen 1 in response to the Zephaniah text, one can hardly miss the implications that the Book of the Twelve presents the destruction of Jerusalem as both the undoing of creation and the day of YHWH, while also presenting the restoration of Jerusalem as re-creation on the day of YHWH.

stream flowing from the temple in two directions also subtly draws on paradise motifs like those in Genesis 2:10-14, where a river flows from Eden and branches outward into four tributaries. To be sure, these motifs have agricultural significance as promises, but like the first two promises of Zechariah 14:6-14 (i.e., no cold and no darkness), this promise also conveys a radical change from the world that exists. The promise of a land watered by an ever-flowing stream holds such appeal precisely because it differs from reality. In the land of Judah, few streams flow yearround. Most dry out during the long, hot, dry season. By contrast, Zechariah 14:8 conceptualizes a day when a stream flows from Jerusalem outward all year long, watering the breadth of the land and enabling the conditions for crops to grow. Since summer is the dry season, the reference to this stream continuing in summer as in winter (the rainy season) stands out as particularly emphatic.

Zechariah 14:9. This verse interrupts the agricultural focus concerning the re-created Jerusalem to introduce two motifs into this depiction of the eschatological age, specifically YHWH's kingship and the oneness of YHWH and YHWH's name. While these two motifs stand out dramatically in this context, neither is inappropriate. Both hearken back to significant themes prominent in the theological narratives of the Deuteronomistic History (most prominently in 1 Sam 7-9) and Deuteronomy. The specific announcement that YHWH will become king over all the earth in many respects, like the allusions to Genesis 1, re-creates a scenario whereby structures of the distant past come back into play. In the narrative of 1 Samuel 7-9, the aging prophet Samuel resists the call from the people to install one of their own as king, arguing that such a move merely imitates the nations and creates too big a temptation to forget that YHWH is king. In many respects, the stories of the kings of Judah and Israel in Samuel and Kings illustrate how prescient Samuel's warning turns out to be. By introducing this motif into the eschatological vision of the future, Zechariah 14 advocates dependence on YHWH as both God and King.

The second motif in this verse begins immediately after the fourth eschatological "on that day" formula that begins the second half of the verse. As with the use of the number "one" in 14:7, the number "one" in 14:9 is syntactically cumbersome but theologically significant. The reader is told in 14:9b that "YHWH will be one, and his name one." Playfully, the number one is doubled for

emphasis, but the first part (“YHWH *ʿehād*”) cites from the very distinctive beginning of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone [YHWH *ʿehād*]).” Moreover, the last portion of 14:9b alludes to the one name, which certainly fits well with the emphasis on worshipping the name of YHWH that plays such a prominent role in the speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy (5:11; 6:13; 10:8, 20; 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23f; 16:2, 6, 11; 18:5, 7, 19f, 22; 21:5; 25:6f; 26:2; 28:10, 58; 32:3).

Zechariah 14:10-11. These verses return to the motif of re-creating Jerusalem and Judah as an agricultural paradise, and in so doing they present the fourth and final radical change of a new created order. Rather than the mountainous terrain surrounding Israel, the steep land will be changed into level ground, making it possible to plant crops of greater variety and quantity than the land around Jerusalem could in reality support. Simultaneously, Jerusalem itself will continue to tower above the surrounding land. This latter picture emphasizes the centrality of Jerusalem and implies its security. Raised aloft, it will have a superior military advantage, and since it will be surrounded by flat, arable land, it will be able to feed more people.

Zechariah 14:11 states explicitly what is implied in 14:10 by promising a future of peace and prosperity for Jerusalem in a series of three declarative statements: the city will be repopulated; it will never again be dedicated to destruction (*hêrem*) as a result of holy war; and it will dwell in security. In many respects, the verse serves as a summary of the main points of 14:1-10 since these verses depict a battle to punish Jerusalem, but a battle that YHWH will win (14:1-2, 3, 5) so that Jerusalem can be repopulated (cf. 14:5). Subsequently, YHWH will make its environment more hospitable for growing crops (14:6-8, 10) and will establish his kingship in the city to protect it militarily (14:9). [Zechariah 14:9 and Malachi 1:14] The word translated as “security” in 14:11 is quite appropriate, since it can describe either military protection (Jer 49:31) or agricultural fecundity (Ezek 28:26), both of which are treated in Zechariah 14:1-10.

Plague and Panic on the Nations, 14:12-15

This third thematic block depicts in brutal terms the overwhelming defeat of the nations by plague and panic. In a sense, in order to focus on the fate of the defeated nations, this block returns to the

Zechariah 14:9 and Malachi 1:14

These two verses link readily with one another by emphasizing a positive attitude toward the nations, by the nations' recognition of YHWH's name, by the kingship of YHWH, and the centrality of Jerusalem. Canonically, one finds an intriguing picture developed between the two passages. The reader first encounters the promise that YHWH's rule over the nations will result in recognition of YHWH's name by the nations (Zech 14:9) in peace for Jerusalem (14:11). By contrast, this future ideal is juxtaposed by a different scenario in Malachi 1:11, 14 in which Jerusalem's population, while not under threat from the nations, has turned its back on YHWH while the nations recognize YHWH, offer incense to YHWH, and honor YHWH's name. This scenario is then used to confront YHWH's people with their own behavior (1:12-13). This juxtaposition sets up a dramatic contrast between the scenario of eschatological promise in Zech 14 and the current reality of Malachi.

No clear consensus has arisen concerning the direction of influence, if any, between these two passages because of differences in the various models regarding whether Zech 9–14 comes into the corpus after Malachi (J. D. Nogalski), before Malachi (A. Schart), or largely with Malachi (J. Wöhrle). Nogalski finds the language and settings of Malachi closer to the time of Zech 1–8 than 9–14, and finds a series of catchwords between Zech 8 and Malachi to be stronger than the thematic connections between Zech 14 and Mal 1. Schart sees the function of Malachi to reorient the reader after Zech 14 to recognize that the coming day of YHWH will be a day of judgment before deliverance. Wöhrle associates texts from Zech 9–14 with the same editorial work that incorporated Malachi into the corpus, but he dates Malachi's inclusion to the early Hellenistic period.

James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 241–47; see also 186–212; Aaron Schart, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftenebergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 297–99; and Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW 389; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008) 123–24; see also 264–87.

battle imagery of 14:1-5. In short, while Zechariah 14:3-11 largely focuses on the positive outcomes of “the day of YHWH” battle for Jerusalem and Judah, 14:12-19 focuses on the negative aspects for the defeated nations. The theme thus changes abruptly in 14:12, yet 14:12 also refers to “all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem,” a phrase that almost certainly alludes to 14:2. The nations that attacked Jerusalem, according to 14:12, will suffer a gruesome plague. The word “plague” (*maggēpā*) is used to refer to mysterious destructive events wrought by YHWH both in Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh (Exod 9:13) and with events resulting from the sin of Israel (e.g., Num 14:37; 17:13-15). The graphic description of the plague on those attacking Jerusalem is gory in its details. These images convey a warning of divine vengeance and seek to offer a level of comfort, ironically, to those for whom this passage was composed.

Zechariah 14:13-14 begins with the fifth “on that day” formula in Zechariah 14, driving home the eschatological quality of the day of

YHWH that began in 14:1. Whereas 14:12 focuses on the gruesome details of the plague, 14:13 highlights the confusion and fear that follow this plague. Thus, the curse of 14:12-13 recounts the plague so that the effects on individuals create mass panic among the warriors who have attacked Jerusalem. Zechariah 14:14 then recounts the aftermath of the battle in which the plunder is taken from the defeated nations as the spoils of war. Reference to the gold, silver, and garments taken as booty following the battle can be found in other texts, both in the Old Testament (2 Kgs 7:8) and

in other ancient Near Eastern contexts. [Plunder and Tribute after Battles]

Zechariah 14:15 extends the effects of the plague to the animals accompanying the armies of those nations. Horses were used in battle to pull chariots, but by the time of the Persian period they were also used by individual soldiers. The use of the saddle by the Persians was one of the technological advances in military history that made the Persian army so formidable.⁷ The remaining animals in this list would have been pack animals used to carry supplies for the army. At any rate, 14:12-15 graphically depicts a horrendous battle wherein the attacking nations are brutally decimated.

Plunder and Tribute after Battles



Consider the list of loot taken from the kings of Syria, Israel, Tyre, and others as noted by Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria from 744–727 BCE:

Gold, silver, tin, iron, elephant-hides, ivory, linen garments with multicolored trimmings, blue-dyed wool, purple-dyed wool, ebony-wood, boxwood-wood, whatever was precious (enough for a) royal treasure; also lambs whose stretched hides were dyed purple, and wild birds whose spread out wings were dyed blue, (furthermore) horses, mules, large and small cattle, (male) camels, female camels with their foals. (*ANET*, 283)

Hope for a Remnant among the Nations, 14:16-19

Following the horrific depiction of the defeat of the nations, the fourth thematic block surprisingly offers blessings and curses to the remnant of those nations. It first announces that this remnant of the nations will come to Jerusalem to worship YHWH during the festival of booths (14:16). Then, 14:17-19 provides a two-tiered curse as a warning to those nations not to fail in their obligation. This is reminiscent of treaty language, yet given the language of survival that opens this thematic block, it is hard not to interpret these verses as the aftermath of the battle on the day of YHWH. In short, this block functions like treaty language laying out the stipulations for a vanquished enemy.

After the brutality of the previous verses, the reader is unprepared for a word of hope for the surviving remnant of the nations who attacked Jerusalem; 14:16, however, not only assumes a remnant of the nations will survive the battle but also envisions a radically new world order in which those who survive will go to Jerusalem to worship YHWH as king of the world (cf. 14:9). Here, there is no hint of a human king arriving as there was in Zechariah 9:9-10. Rather, the nations will demonstrate their obeisance to YHWH by an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of booths. [Festival of Booths] The festival of booths came to prominence in the Persian period, as can be deduced from its significance in Persian period literature (see, e.g., Ezra 3:4; Neh 8:13-18). This festival ostensibly

Festival of Booths



The festival of booths has a long history as one of the three premier festivals of ancient Israel (with the festivals of weeks and of Passover). The early history is closely tied to harvest festivals, and the booths were originally structures made of tree branches intertwined with one another and used for shelter in the fields during harvest times. By the postexilic period, especially under the influence of Priestly sources (especially Lev 23:39-43) and Nehemiah (8:13-18; but see also Ezra 3:4), the festival came to be even more closely aligned with the people's time in the wilderness after escaping Egypt. For further reading, see Bruce Chilton, "Booths, Feast or Festival of," *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 1:491-94.

commemorates the time in the wilderness when tents, or booths, constituted the only dwellings available to the Israelites in the wilderness. The festival lasted for seven days around harvest time.

Although Zechariah 14:16 offers hope for a remnant of the nations, 14:17-19 offers a two-tiered curse should those nations fail to perform their duties to YHWH. First, Zechariah 14:17 pronounces a curse

on any nation not going up to worship YHWH: they will receive no rain. This curse also contrasts markedly with the verdant quality of the re-created Jerusalem and Judah described in 14:6-11. What follows in Zechariah 14:18-19 reads in some ways like an afterthought since it recognizes that the agricultural climate of Egypt was not dependent on rainfall to the same degree as the lands in Palestine. Rather, Egypt largely depended on lands near the Nile River to water its crops, and the Nile provided water when rain was in short supply. Thus, 14:18 provides a special punishment for Egypt: a return of the plague. Zechariah 14:19 summarizes the punishment that will fall on Egypt and any nation who does not celebrate the festival of booths in the eschatological age. Because 14:19 includes both aspects of the curse, the plague on Egypt and the lack of rain on the nations, it is more likely that 14:17-19 deliberately set up a two-tiered curse than that 14:18 represents a later insertion.

A Pure and Holy Jerusalem, 14:20-21

The fifth and final thematic block (14:20-21) provides insight into the factors motivating the image of the day of YHWH. Specifically, these verses anticipate the expansion of purity and holiness in Jerusalem because of this new reality. Zechariah 14:20-21 thus changes focus yet again, concluding Zechariah with the picture of a holy and purified Jerusalem. The images in 14:20-21 portray Jerusalem as a place so sacred that the entire city will be as holy as the temple. The vision of holiness expands exponentially as the temple becomes as sacred as the holy of holies and the city becomes

a sacred as the temple complex. The horses, the animals of war, will wear decorative bells inscribed with the phrase “holy to YHWH.” This phrase has added significance as the phrase inscribed on the gold plate attached to the turban of Aaron in Exodus 28:36. Moreover, if the bells worn by the horses convey the same level of holiness as the headdress of Aaron, then the purity and sanctity of the temple must be magnified further. Ordinary cooking utensils of the temple will be as holy as those used for ritual sacrifice. In short, everything within Jerusalem will be consecrated and become as holy as the temple, and the entire temple will become as sacred as the holy of holies.

Zechariah 14:21b ends the book with a pointed restatement of the need for radical purity in the temple and a reminder that the vision must await the eschatological era. While some have seen 14:21b as an afterthought, it can also be interpreted as an explanation of the need. The final statement reads like both a longing for a different kind of future and a condemnation of the present: “and there shall *no longer* be *traders* in the house of YHWH *on that day*.” To long for a time when something will no longer be present most assuredly implies that it currently is. The word translated in many versions as “traders” is actually the word “Canaanites,” which many interpret as a slang expression for merchants in this context (see discussion in Zech 11:7, 11). Indeed, whoever composed these words envisioned a time when the temple complex would no longer be used as a place of commerce for the buying and selling of the animals and utensils needed for sacrifice. Rather, the temple would be a place of holiness where no one would be forced to barter before sacrificing. Finally, Zechariah ends with a reminder that this image of a purified and holy Jerusalem still lies in the eschatological future. For the seventh and final time, the eschatological formula reminds the reader that these events will only happen “on that day.”

CONNECTIONS

Zechariah 14 develops a complex picture of the day of YHWH that furnishes these events with details to a degree virtually unparalleled in Old Testament texts, yet the picture is replete with contradictory images and loose ends when one tries to plot the narrative flow.

Such ambiguity may not be accidental. Indeed, the contradictions themselves may be intentional. The nature of the montage (to use Petersen's term) leaves any careful reader uncomfortable: Jerusalem will be restored, but not before it is nearly destroyed; Jerusalem will be attacked, but YHWH will deliver it; YHWH sends the nations against Jerusalem, but YHWH will defeat the nations; a remnant of YHWH's people will survive and populate Jerusalem into perpetuity, but so will a remnant of the nations survive to visit Jerusalem annually in celebration of the festival of booths. Only one constant seems unchallenged: YHWH is the king who will rule the world.

This most detailed exploration of the day of YHWH, in the end, raises more questions than it can answer. Why does YHWH send the nations against Jerusalem? We are not told. Why does God then punish the nations for doing as YHWH commanded? We are not told. Will one's religious practices protect one from harm on the day of YHWH? We are not told.

Although these contradictions and loose ends create a paradox, they just as surely warn the community against *complacency* regarding religious obligations. Specifically, they warn against a theological rigidity that assumes only my group will survive the day of YHWH. Such ambiguity unsettles many individuals and communities in the religious world even today. For some, the idea of a day of reckoning in which only a few will survive represents a parochial, naïve theology from a bygone era. For these believing communities, the utopian images of a re-created world free of natural calamity and human hostility belong more to the realm of fairy tale than to the world of their faith life. For others, the idea that God might deliver foreigners, or people of other faiths, makes a mockery of their own religious commitment. For these believing communities, if religious commitment does not guarantee their survival in God's presence, then it serves no useful function. If, in the end, God chooses a remnant from other faiths whose actions *we deem* hostile to God, then why do we bother to live in obedience?

The theological discomfort generated by the ambiguity inherent in these eschatological images serves an important function for those in the church. Lest we project our views about how God must act, and in so doing think we have constrained how God must behave, this text reminds us of the inscrutable mystery that is God. Lest we be too quick to condemn those with whom we disagree, this text reminds us that we seldom see the whole picture.

Lest we be too quick to leave the world to its own devices, this text depicts God's eschatological world as this world re-created, a world capable of sustaining life through agricultural resources and a world free of military threat.

Zechariah 14 forces the careful reader to ask questions about the purpose of creation and the goal of history using the day of YHWH as a focal point. In many respects, little has changed since these words were penned. Nations still fight one another. Drought and hunger still plague many parts of the globe. Religious faiths vie with one another over their right to impose beliefs about God on one another.

Yet such threats are not the whole story. Consider, for example, the promises of Zechariah 14:6-11. We still live in a world where cold and frost exist, but for most Western societies, cold and frost do not threaten the majority of the population because we can heat our homes and clothe our bodies. The world still alternates between light and darkness and the length of daylight still changes seasonally. But in much of the populated world, electric lights mean we are not confined to our homes when darkness comes. The world still lacks an abundant source of fresh water, but humanity has found ways to bring water to land that would have been uninhabitable when the words of 14:6-11 were written. In fact, one wonders whether the biblical writer who penned these words would look at our world and proclaim the promises fulfilled. The day of YHWH is not a static concept but a way of envisioning what God wants for creation and for history. It is a way of envisioning the future that sees both the need for accountability and the need for hope. It is a way of calling us forward, challenging us individually and corporately to leave the world a better place than we found it.

What of the idea that God may allow some from the enemy nations to worship in Jerusalem? Here again, humility demands that we tread carefully about our certainty regarding both our own fate and the fate of others. Consider the role of the character Emeth in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. [Emeth and Aslan] Lewis obviously extrapolates upon Jesus' teaching about God's redemption of those not considered redeemable by some. Jesus uses the "least of these my brethren" when speaking to the righteous *and* to those on his left hand in Matthew 25:31-46. We often preach more about the first group, the righteous who are granted eternal life but who did

Emeth and Aslan



In the seventh volume of the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, the character Emeth (whose name means “truth” in Hebrew) is one of the Calormene, the enemy fighting against the forces of Aslan. Emeth has served another god, Tash, all his life, only to learn in the end that the god was a false god who was truly evil. When they reach the world beyond the world, Emeth is surprised when Aslan shows him mercy and allows him to remain. Emeth bows in fear before Aslan, who tells him, “Son, thou art welcome.” Emeth’s next words reveal something remarkable:

But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by

reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, [. . .] that thou and Tash are one? The lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, it is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted.

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, book 7 of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Harper Collins: 1994) 188–89.

not know they were feeding, clothing, and visiting Jesus. But the story concludes by addressing those who are surprised to learn that they are consigned to eternal punishment because “Just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did *not* do it to me.” The teachings of Jesus warn us to spend more time doing good works in Jesus’ name than worrying about which doctrine gets stated most precisely.

NOTES

1. See the brief summary in David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 137–39 (see also pages 26–29).

2. Meyers and Meyers appear to treat the chapter as a composition with four sub-units from the author of second Zechariah (*Zechariah 9–14* [AB 25C; New York: Doubleday 1993] 415–16, 432, 451, 464).

3. Paul Redditt understands the chapter as a composite of short oracles (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 137–38. Petersen prefers the term “montage,” but one whose “units, vignettes, or sayings” are combined in a way that gives them a more literary quality than the montage of 12:1–13:6 (*Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 139).

4. To a certain degree, Meyers and Meyers correctly point out that one can harmonize these two images by *assuming* that a third group in 14:2, specifically those killed, would also be intended (Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 415). Nevertheless, conceptually, language dividing the groups into three suggests an independent composition from language speaking of two halves. This distinction illustrates some of the fine considerations that must be weighed in determining the character of Zech 14 and the interrelationships of the units. One must distinguish between inherent

logic and connective logic in these verses. The former is more likely the creative work of an author while the latter reflects the creativity and logic of the compiler/editor/arranger.

5. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, 426.

6. *Ibid.*, 432–42. Note especially the summary statement of the four radical changes that “all will be completely conducive to transforming Jerusalem’s immediate agricultural base . . . from one providing an insecure bare subsistence to one with the potential for unmitigated perpetual abundance” (442).

7. See the discussion of warfare in Philip Sabin and Philip de Souza, “Land Battles,” in *Rome from the Late Republic to the Late Empire*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (Philip Sabin et al., eds.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 399–433.

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MALACHI

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF MALACHI

Dating the Prophet and the Book

The prophet Malachi has been the subject of speculation for over two millennia, largely because the book provides no explicit biographical data. [Malachi in Jewish Tradition] It is often argued that even the name Malachi (which means “my messenger”) derives from YHWH’s proclamation in 3:1 that YHWH is about to send “my messenger” to initiate the day of YHWH. Jewish tradition has associated Malachi

Malachi in Jewish Tradition



References to Malachi in Jewish tradition revolve around two issues: first, the identity of the prophet and those with whom he associated; and second, his prophetic power and teaching. The identity of Malachi creates some confusion in rabbinic traditions along with the LXX and modern scholarship. The LXX probably reflects that the confusion was present early when it translates the name “his messenger” rather than the name Malachi (which means “my messenger”). While most rabbinic references assume Malachi was the name of the prophet, two other lines of tradition also appear identifying Malachi as Ezra and Mordecai respectively.

The prophet named Malachi is mentioned several times as a contemporary of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and sometimes these traditions mention that these prophets returned together from exile (Ginzberg, 4:354). These traditions usually place this return in the time of Ezra, probably because of the reference to Haggai and Zechariah in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. When the three are mentioned together, Malachi always appears last, probably reflecting the canonical ordering of these three writings and/or the functioning temple that is not rebuilt in Haggai and Zech 1–8. Some rabbinic texts mention Malachi (with Haggai and Zechariah) as friends with Daniel, but Daniel was not considered a prophet even though he was given a vision of the end (6:413). Clearly this line of tradition deals with the canon, attempting to explain why Daniel appears among the Writings and not among the Prophets.

Several lines of tradition associate Malachi with Ezra (4:354; 6:441, note 33; 6:442, note 38; 6:432, note 5). The

reason for making this association has to do with traditions recorded in the Targum (also reflected in Jerome’s prologue to the Duodecim Prophetarum). Targum Jonathan for Mal 1:1 reads, “The burden of the word of YHWH concerning Israel through my messenger (*mal’aki*), whose name is called Ezra the scribe.” The figure of Ezra became a prominent character around whom many traditions developed because of his association with reinstituting the Torah in the postexilic period. A few traditions also identify Malachi with Mordecai, the uncle of Esther, ostensibly because the last verse of Esther refers to Mordecai as “next in rank to king Ahasuerus” (6:432).

The power of the prophet is tied to the message of Malachi. In some traditions, Malachi was treated as a postexilic prophet who had a trace of prophetic power, though this power was not deemed as strong as that of the preexilic prophets (6:385–86). Malachi also, according to one tradition, was among the five people who helped Ezra compile the Mishnah (6:446). In one of the more elaborate expositions of a text in Malachi, one finds the prophet Elijah associated with the eschatological teaching of children that helps to unite the children with their parents in the world to come. This tradition thus combines references to the day of YHWH in Mal 4:1 (MT 3:19) with the role of Elijah in 4:5 (MT 3:23) who will reunite parents and children in the world to come by teaching them how to petition for their parents, thus fulfilling 4:6 (MT 3:24; Ginzberg, 4:235).

Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946–1947).

with everyone from Elijah to Ezra (see Mal 1:1). Recent redactional work (see the discussion below of the unity of Malachi) suggests that the book as we now have it arose in two or three stages. In this respect, dating the original prophet behind the writing can only be derived from the foundational material, not the later expansions.

There are, nevertheless, certain indicators within the text that help to situate the author within a historical context. Only occasionally has anyone suggested that Malachi derives from a preexilic context, but these arguments have never gained much traction. Malachi 1:8 refers to the government official using the Akkadian loan word *pehâ* (usually translated governor), a term suggesting the existence of Persian governmental structures (see Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21, where this term refers to Zerubbabel). Further, in Malachi the temple is fully functional. The quality and the quantity of the sacrifices and offerings brought to the temple represent a major point of contention in Malachi because apathy on the part of both the priests and leaders causes them to give less than they should. Nevertheless, the temple is presumed to be functioning (1:10; 3:1, 10), meaning that the completion of the temple (c. 515 BCE) represents the point before which the foundational material in Malachi could not have been composed. The temple had likely been functioning for a while since apathy poses such a problem and since nothing in Malachi speaks of the temple as a new institution. For this reason, scholars often presume 450 BCE constitutes an approximate time when the bulk of Malachi could have been composed.

The latest date for the book's composition is more subjective because the arguments derive from evidence that can be interpreted variously or that is lacking. The picture of society that develops as one reads Malachi suggests internal conflict. The extensive use of disputations provides Malachi with a contentious tenor, and the rhetoric becomes harsh in places (e.g., 2:3). By the end of Malachi, accusations of deceit, corruption, and the abandonment of YHWH by the priests and the people lead to the expectation of a pious remnant separating itself from fellow priests and fellow citizens.

By contrast, the material in Malachi (especially when compared with passages like Zech 12 and 14) paints a relatively positive picture of "the nations" (see 1:10-14) so that the more turbulent times of the fourth century do not seem as likely a setting. In the early decades of the fourth century, numerous rebellions in the surrounding regions and in Egypt created a less stable environment

leading to the overthrow of the Persians by Alexander in 332 BCE. Malachi's positive portrayal of the nations would hardly seem possible during periods when major hostilities were taking place close to Israel's border. These elements suggest a time when the internal dynamics of Judah and Jerusalem were more pressing than the international situation.

The relationship of Malachi to the time of Ezra or Nehemiah has become complicated in recent years by the difficulties in dating these figures as well as the books that bear their names. Malachi has frequently been linked with, or identified as, Ezra in early Jewish traditions, but these traditions are speculative at best. Scholarship of the twentieth century tended to associate Malachi with the time just before or after Nehemiah because of the issue of exogamy. [Exogamy and Nehemiah] These correlations assumed, however, that 2:10-16 challenged widespread practices of Judean men marrying foreign wives, essentially supporting the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah in requiring these men to divorce. Neither of these assumptions seems as secure today as it did a generation ago, but a date between 450 and 400 still garners more support than other suggestions.

Exogamy and Nehemiah



Both Ezra and Nehemiah treat exogamy (marriage to foreigners) as a problem in postexilic Judah, due in part at least to Deut 7:1-4.

¹When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—²and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. ³Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

Ezra 9–10 interprets intermarriage with foreigners (adapting the list noted above; see Ezra 9:1) as a major factor in Jerusalem's destruction because it illustrated Israel's disobedience. Ezra also condemns this practice for the current generation as a continuation of the problem

that exacerbates the guilt of Israel (see Ezra 10:10). As a result (according to Ezra 10:11), Ezra commands the men of Israel to divorce their foreign wives, which they agree to do (10:12). In Nehemiah 9–10, only after the wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt, Ezra again appears as a teacher who focuses on keeping the Torah and separating Jews from foreigners in worship (cf. 9:2; 10:28). These proscriptions later lead Nehemiah to force Jewish men to divorce their foreign wives (Neh 13:23-27), now including Solomon in the condemnation of those who married foreign women and brought guilt upon Israel. These attitudes in Ezra and Nehemiah are driven by a strong sense of ethnic and theological purity. The leadership of postexilic Judah essentially compelled ethnic purity. Modern communities of faith should rightly raise questions about the human toll such policies demanded.

For reflections on dealing with this issue, see Juliana M. Claassens, "Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Foreign Women," in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction* (ed. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray; Resources for Biblical Study 49; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 236–38.

Literary Form, Structure, and Unity of Malachi

Form and Structure. The form and structure of Malachi are intricately bound together because the genre of the disputation dominates. Apart from the superscription (1:1), disputations frame the entire book, except 3:16-18 and 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24). The characteristics of the disputation are widely recognized because of the work of Egon Pfeiffer, who delineated the twofold rhetorical movement of this form in Malachi as involving an affirmation and a response. [Statement/Question/Response Schema] The disputation usually begins with an affirmation that introduces the subject to be explored. The response to the affirmation works rhetorically either

Statement/Question/Response Schema



Egon Pfeiffer demonstrated the extent to which the structural markers of Malachi rely on a statement/question/response schema.

Verses	Statement	Question(s)	Response
1:1	Superscription		
1:2-5	I have loved you. (1:2)	But you say, "How have you love us?" (1:2)	I have loved Jacob and hated Esau. (1:2b-3a)
1:6–2:9	A son honors his father and a servant his master. (1:6)	Where is my honor? You say, "How have we despised your name?" (1:6)	You present defiled food. (1:7)
2:10-16 (first question precedes statement)	Judah has committed an abomination. (2:11)	Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers? (2:10)	May YHWH cut off those bringing false offerings. (2:12)
	YHWH will not accept the offering from your hand. (2:13)	You say, "Why?" (2:14)	Because you mistreated the wife of your youth. (2:14) I hate divorce. (2:16)
2:17–3:5	You have wearied YHWH with your words. (2:17) I will send my messenger to clear the way before me. (3:1)	You say, "How have we wearied him?" (2:17) But who can endure the day of his coming? (3:2)	When you say, "Everyone who does evil is good." (2:18) He will purify the sons of Levi so that they may present offerings to YHWH in righteousness. (3:3)
3:6-12	I do not change. Return to me. (3:6-7)	You say, "How do we return?" (3:7)	With (proper) tithes and offerings. (3:8)
3:13-21	Your words have been arrogant against me. (3:13)	You say, "What have we spoken against you?" (3:13)	You said, "It is vain to serve YHWH." (3:14-15)
3:22-24	Conclusion		

Chart adapted from Egon Pfeiffer, "Die Disputationsworte im Buche Maleachi: Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Struktur," *Evangelische Theologie* 19 (1959): 546–68.

to illustrate the main statement or to explore the statement further by adding accusations, admonitions, or didactic elements.

Two primary devices convey the affirmation in Malachi: simple statements and rhetorical questions. Both devices are usually present, but the style varies. Sometimes the units begin with simple statements (1:2; 2:17; 3:6, 13) and sometimes with rhetorical questions (1:6; 2:10). Another stylistic variation occurs in the way in which the conversation partners are included. Sometimes YHWH's speech explicitly contrasts with the speech of the addressee (see 1:2-5), while at other points specific addressees are named prior to their presentation of a counter argument to a general statement by YHWH (see 1:6). A third variation appears in the way in which the disputation may compound the rhetorical question and the statement by doubling them up (see 1:6; 2:17) or advancing the argument by using a second pair (note that the question in 2:10 is followed by a statement in 2:11, while a statement 2:13 is followed by a question in 2:14).

The form and scope of the six units has been clearly documented, but the arrangement of the whole receives less attention. Because the units convey the statement/response schema, and because they report dialogues, it is often assumed that the disputations represent six relatively independent units. Recent redactional studies do not make these assumptions (see the discussion of the unity of Malachi below), but what has not been as frequently noted is the extent to which the focus shifts from the present to the future with the introduction of the day of YHWH in 3:1.

For this reason, this commentary divides the disputations in Malachi into two sections: first, Malachi 1:2–2:16 focuses on accusations against priests and the people to demonstrate the extent of the problem; and second, 2:17–4:6 shifts the focus to the future in order to explore the implications of the day of YHWH as the solution. The interplay between the units in the second half of the book becomes increasingly recognizable so that the nature of these disputations, combined with the narrative elements beginning in 3:16, appear more interdependent than independent. Further, the interdependence of 3:1–4:6 involves not only texts in Malachi but in the Book of the Twelve, the Torah, and the beginning of the Prophets (*Nebi'im*). [Tanak]

Malachi concludes with three units (3:16-18; 4:1-3, 4-6 [MT 3:19-21, 22-24]) whose relationship to the context is clear but

Tanak

ΑΩ The word “Prophets” here refers to the second part of the Hebrew canon, the *Nebi'im*. The Hebrew canon is called the Tanak and represents the same text as the Protestant Old Testament, though the order of the books is different. The Tanak is an acronym for the three parts of the canon (*Torah*, *Nebi'im*, *Ketubim*). The *Nebi'im* consist of eight books, four Former Prophets and Four Latter Prophets. The four Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The latter two were each divided into two parts, probably when translated into Greek, but were counted as single books in Jewish tradition until the Middle Ages. The four Latter Prophets included Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (see the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary).

whose function differs from that of the disputations. Malachi 3:16-18 abruptly breaks off the disputation of 3:13-15 with a narrative report of the positive response to the prophet by a group for whom a book of remembrance is written.

Malachi 4:1-3 (MT 3:19-21) picks up where 3:13-15 leaves off (dealing with the fate of the arrogant and the wicked on the coming day of YHWH), but it also treats the fate of those fearing YHWH (3:20 [MT 4:2]). It thus combines three elements from the surrounding context: the coming day of YHWH (3:1), the arrogant

and evildoers (3:15), and the YHWH fearers (3:16). Malachi 3:19-21 thus serves meaningfully as the original ending to the book.

Malachi 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) represents both a later addition and an expanded perspective on Malachi's expectations for the day of YHWH. The perspective of these verses reflects a more explicitly canonical orientation that is aware of Malachi's role as the conclusion to the Book of the Twelve and of Malachi's role as the conclusion to the Prophets (*Nebi'im*). It demonstrates this awareness by linking the Torah and Moses with the Former Prophets and Elijah (the most prominent prophet in the Former Prophets) not only by calling these characters by name but also by using subtle allusions to the beginning of Joshua, the first book of the Former Prophets. These connections are also woven into expectations concerning Elijah's role on the day of YHWH.

Unity. Apart from Malachi 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24), no solid consensus has arisen regarding which portions of Malachi constitute additions to the core material in the book. This does not, however, resolve the issue of the book's compositional unity. Scholars frequently suggest that certain passages represent interpolations from a later hand (notably 1:11-14; 3:2-4a; 4:4-6 [MT 3:22-24]), and recent redactional studies have isolated more than one layer of material because of subtle shifts in content. The consistency with which these issues arise suggests that the final word on Malachi's compositional history has not yet been written, but two models can serve as starting points for discussion, the model of Erich Bosshard and Reinhard Gregor Kratz and the model of Jakob Wöhrle.

Bosshard and Kratz

E. Bosshard and R. G. Kratz argue for three layers of material:

Foundational Layer

Parallel Confrontations:
1:6–2:9 (minus 1:14a):
Priests
3:6–12: People

Malachi II

Judgment: People and
Priests on the day of YHWH
2:17–3:5
3:13–4:3 (MT 3:13–21)

Final Layer

Separate Writing
1:1: Superscription
1:14a
2:10–12
4:4–6 (MT 3:22–24):

Uncertain

1:2–5: Probably Foundational
Layer
2:13–16: Probably
Foundational Layer


For Bosshard and Kratz, the foundational layer of Malachi forms the core of the writing: 1:6–2:9 (minus 1:14b) + 3:6–12. This material contains two sections constructed in parallel with one another, the first confronting the priests and the second the people. This initial composition played directly off of Haggai and Zech 1–8. A second layer (2:17–3:5, 13–21) expands the corpus with two symmetrically structured blocks against priests and people that both anticipate coming judgment and indicate a split in the community. In their model, the final layer expands the writing in four places (1:1, 14; 2:10–12; 4:4–6 [MT 3:22–24]). In so doing, this final layer creates a superscription (1:1) and a conclusion (4:4–6 [MT 3:22–24]) that separate Malachi from Zechariah and close the prophetic canon. The remaining two passages (1:14; 2:10–12) add comments into the existing text to challenge the actions of the priests and the people. Bosshard and Kratz are uncertain how to account for 2:13–16, and they concede that while 1:2–5 may belong to the foundational layer, its relationship to that layer is not entirely clear.

Erich Bosshard and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, "Maleachi im Zwölfprophetenbuch," *Biblische Notizen* 52 (1990): 27–46.

According to Bosshard and Kratz, Malachi essentially reached its final shape in three stages, although their model cannot fully account for two passages.¹ [Bosshard and Kratz] The keys for understanding Malachi for Bosshard and Kratz, then, are the parallel elements between priests and people, the motivation for composing a redactional continuation of Zechariah, and the developing split in the community that involved some priests and some of the people, a split that plays out in the coming day of judgment.

Wöhrle offers a more complex process wherein a markedly different foundational layer receives one significant redactional expansion whose chief characteristic is its criticism of the cult followed by a series of four smaller additions that relate to redactions in the development of the Book of the Twelve.² Wöhrle also isolates six insertions that do not represent a theological agenda for shaping Malachi or the Twelve but that react to the immediate context. [Wöhrle's Model]

Wöhrle offers an intricate model that helps recognize important structural elements but complicates the development of the corpus unnecessarily. On the one hand, his observations concerning the framing structure of 1:2–3 and 3:13–19* provide a rationale for (at least portions of) the opening disputation and correctly link 3:13–15 with 3:19 to complete the thoughts of the final disputation. On the other hand, his unique view that Hosea had for a time

Wöhrlé's Model  J. Wöhrlé's model is more complex.				
1. Foundational Layer: Confronting the People 1:2-3, 6 (minus the word "priests"), 7b-8a, 9b, 10b, 12-14 (minus two words in 1:12); 2:10, 14-17 (minus four words in 2:16); 3:1-2, 5-6, 8-15, 19		2. Expansion: Critique of the Cult 1:6 ("Priests"), 12 ("it is despised"), 1:7a, 10a, 2:1-9, 11-13 (minus one word in 2:11); 3:3a, 3:4		
3. Pious and Wicked 3:16-18, 20-21	4. Foreigner Layer II 1:1, 4-5	5. Grace Layer 1:9a	6. <i>Nebi'im</i> Layer 3:22-24	7. Isolated Insertions 1:7b, 11a
These three layers are associated with the Book of the Twelve.				2:11 ("in Israel") 2:16 ("says YHWH God of Israel") 3:3b, 7

For Wöhrlé, the foundational layer contains the following: 1:2-3, 6 (minus one word, "priests"), 7b-8a, 9b, 10b, 12-14 (minus two words in 1:12); 2:10, 14-17 (minus four words in 2:16); 3:1-2, 5-6, 8-15, 19. Wöhrlé's model concludes that the foundational layer was directed only against the people as a whole, not the priests. He does, however, suggest a structural chiasm that accounts for portions of Malachi with which the model of Bosshard and Kratz struggled to find a place, while at the same time underscoring the parallel portions of Malachi already noted by them. This chiastic structure includes A—the relationship of the people with God (1:2-3 // 3:13-19*); B—dealing with the cult (1:6-14 // 3:6-12); and C—a focus on the community (2:10-16 // 2:17–3:5). The major redactional work that expands this layer by critiquing the cult includes the words "priests" in 1:6 and "it is despised" in 1:12 as well as the more extensive insertions in 1:7a, 10a; 2:1-9, 11-13 (minus one word in 2:11); 3:3a, 4.

A third redaction of Malachi dealing with the pious and wicked adds 3:16-18, 20-21. The fourth and fifth layers are relatively small insertions into Malachi that tie into more extensive passages that Wöhrlé delineates elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve. These include the superscription (1:1) and the expansion (1:4-5) of the first disputation, both of which he argues relate to what he labels as Foreigner Layer II in the Book of the Twelve. Wöhrlé believes that only at this point does Malachi enter the Book of the Twelve, along with Obadiah and an insertion that connects Malachi with other redactional material in the Twelve. Mal 1:9a constitutes a brief insertion that relates to what Wöhrlé calls the "Grace Layer of the Book of the Twelve." Finally, Wöhrlé labels 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) as an insertion transcending the Book of the Twelve to include other parts of the canon, notably the Torah and the Prophets (*Nebi'im*).

Jakob Wöhrlé, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW 389; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 219–63.

been removed from the developing corpus, combined with his insistence that 1:6–2:9 originally related only to the people at large, forces him to remove individual words and half verses from the foundational material in a way that strikes one as rather heavy handed.

Both of these models deserve fuller treatment than can be offered in this commentary, but a few comments may suggest a way to resolve some of the issues. One reason why neither the idea of interpolations nor of redactional layers has taken hold in Malachi scholarship in general has to do with the fact that, despite the

subtle changes in perspective, one can read these texts meaningfully in their context. To be sure, this “readability factor” often suggests unity to those predisposed to see it, but it probably has not been given adequate attention by those whose close reading suggests more than one ideological interest present in these texts.

Another model may account both for the sense of unity and for the sense that some portions of the text are not as cohesive as others relative to the flow of the book. Rather than understanding these tensions merely as points of disjuncture that came into the writing over an extended period, this model explains Malachi as a compilation, rather than a composition, wherein disparate elements have been integrated into the writing by (an) editor(s) in fewer stages than these redactional models have heretofore suggested. In other words, Malachi’s unity and diversity is better explained as editorial compilation, arrangement, and adaptation of source material than through models of gradual accretion. Two issues should be explored more completely, though the space allotted in this commentary for such issues means that a fuller exploration will still be required. These issues include (1) the interplay of redactional and source material and (2) the literary horizons in which the editorial work takes place.

(1) One can detect considerable interplay between the use of source material and redactional elements such as transitions, continuations (*Fortschreibungen*), and summaries. Some of the tensions noted by Bosshard, Kratz, Wöhrle, and others are real, but they could be explained as editorial adaptations of source material in the service of the compilation just as easily as indicators of redactional layers.

For example, Malachi 4:1-3 (MT 3:19-21) resolves the abrupt ending of the final disputation (3:13-15), which confronts those bothered by the prosperity of the wicked without ever explaining the fate of the wicked. Malachi 4:1-3 resolves this disputation by announcing that the arrogant and the wicked will be destroyed on the coming day of YHWH. Malachi 4:1-3 cannot, of course, be merely assumed as the original ending to the disputation in 3:13-15, since 4:2-3 (MT 3:20-21) also connects to the narrative report of 3:16-18, by referring to the fate of those fearing YHWH and by connecting their fate to the day of YHWH and its aftermath (the theme with which 3:1 began). Nevertheless, when one recognizes that the vocative “those fearing YHWH” stands out

from its context as syntactically unnecessary, it suggests that 4:1-3 would have been better suited as part of the original disputation (3:13-15+4:1-3). This disputation answers the charge of those who have wearied YHWH by saying that the wicked prosper. The answer represents a fairly standard response to the theodicy problem. Namely, the wicked will be punished on YHWH's day of judgment.

Both of the redactional treatments mentioned above have difficulty explaining 3:13-4:3. Bosshard and Kratz incorporate 3:13-16 into the first expansion (Mal II) because the ultimate focus of this expansion deals with the coming day of YHWH in 4:1-3, and that is characteristic of the Malachi II perspective. They do not, however, deal with the parenthetical function of the narrative in 3:13-16. If they are bothered by the abrupt ending of 3:15, they do not indicate it. By contrast, Wöhrle sees two layers of material in 3:13-4:3. Wöhrle correctly notes the insertional character of 3:16-18, and connects 3:13-15 to 4:1 (MT 3:19) as the original conclusion to his foundational layer. Wöhrle, however, combines the insertion of 3:16-18 with the description of the fate of the wicked and the righteous and 4:2-3 (MT 3:20-21) to form a separate redactional layer that he calls the pious/wicked redaction³. These five verses represent the only verses in Malachi assigned to this layer. It is not clear that 4:2-3 needs to be separated from 4:1 as the original ending to the disputation. Nor is it clear why this material necessarily belongs to separate redactional strata whereby these verses, and only these verses, were added to Malachi to end the book prior to the late redactional addition of 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24). A single compositional process that expanded the disputation (3:13-15+4:1-3) with the report about the response of those fearing YHWH (3:16-18) makes better sense of both the tension and the inherent logic of the material. Both models already ascribe (at least) portions of 3:16-18 and 4:1-3 to the day of YHWH material beginning in 3:1. It is unclear why this thematic emphasis is not associated with the interests of the compiler of the disputations who has arranged these confrontations with the purpose of explaining the fate of the righteous and the wicked on the day of YHWH. Malachi makes better sense as a compilation of source material blended with the interests of the compiler in a single process (with the exception of 4:4-6).

(2) An expanded literary horizon that includes the incorporation of themes related to the Book of the Twelve rather than Malachi as

an isolated writing may go a long way in explaining some of the inherent tensions within the material in Malachi. Malachi 1:2-5 certainly draws on the disputation genre so dominant in the remainder of Malachi, but two motifs (the fate of Edom, the love of YHWH) within these verses have at least as much to offer for their functions in the Book of the Twelve as for Malachi alone. Nothing in 1:2-5 is inherently connected to 1:6-2:9. As an independent disputation Malachi 1:2-5 functions as a self-contained unit that can be read as a thematic introduction to Malachi. Nevertheless, this unit also resolves, literarily, the question of Edom's fate in the Book of the Twelve. Edom is the subject of several judgment oracles in the opening writings of the Book of the Twelve (Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11-12; 9:12; Obad 1-21), but in those passages Edom's judgment always lays in the future. By contrast, the inherent logic of Malachi 1:2-5 presupposes that Edom has been punished. When read with Obadiah, Malachi 1:2-5 also raises the expectations that the day of YHWH grows near, a theme that is precisely the focus of the second half of Malachi. Moreover, YHWH's love of Israel constituted a central motif in Hosea, but one that does not appear prominently again until Malachi.

Malachi 3:11 refers to the devourer, implying a locust or some other pest that has been afflicting the land as part of a curse. This verse functions as part of the inherent logic of 3:6-12, a unit designed to confront the people with a call to repent. The imagery in these verses closely parallels the logic of Joel 1-2 and helps to create one of the prominent characteristics of the Book of the Twelve as a corpus. Namely, despite all the attempts of prophets through the Twelve to change the behavior of the people, at the end of the corpus the people and their religious leaders remain pretty much as they were in Hosea. Malachi holds out hope only that a small group will survive the coming day of YHWH. On the other hand, coming full circle as it does, Malachi 3:6-12 (especially combined with 1:2-5) emphasizes the consistency and the love of YHWH even while confronting the idolatry and unethical behavior of the people. This interweaving of themes into Malachi implies not an inherent cynicism but a conviction that the word of YHWH must confront every generation anew. To hear 3:6-12 merely as a reflection of an isolated event in the middle years of the Persian period does not do justice to the message of consistency (vv. 6-7) or the language of Joel in this unit as part of both the threat and the promise from YHWH.

Malachi in the Book of the Twelve

Malachi is uniquely conceived, and its placement at the end of the Book of the Twelve can hardly be accidental. Its unique conception relies on the power of the disputation to challenge the *current* behavior and attitudes of people and their religious leaders. Nearly every unit in Malachi calls for some kind of response. Malachi also reflects on the past and warns about the future. In this respect, the disputations constantly challenge the reader to connect to the broader story—the failure of earlier generations to heed the prophets and change syncretistic cultic practices on the one hand and to fear the coming day of YHWH on the other.

The previous section noted how Malachi 1:2-5 and 3:6-12 operate from a broader literary horizon than the immediate context of Malachi. The day of YHWH in Malachi also echoes the language of other day of YHWH texts in the Book of the Twelve, suggesting a complex tapestry of interwoven threads that makes it difficult to determine with confidence which text draws upon which. These threads include literary allusions to other day of YHWH texts in the Book of the Twelve (see the opening chapter of this commentary) wherein Malachi appears both as the apparent source to which others allude and as the text doing the alluding. On the whole, Malachi more frequently appears to be the borrower, the one relying on motifs from earlier in the corpus (as in 1:2-5 and 3:6-12) but also beyond the Book of the Twelve to the transition from the end of the Pentateuch to the beginning of Joshua (see Mal 4:4-6 [MT 3:22-24]). Nevertheless, Zechariah 13:7-9 draws on both Malachi and Hosea, and Joel 2:11 appears to anticipate Malachi 4:3 (MT 3:23), even as Malachi 3:6-12 can be read as presupposing Joel.

The Book of Remembrance in Malachi 3:16-18 also needs to be heard as a reference to the developing corpus itself. Contrary to most interpretations of 3:16-18 that treat the book as a heavenly book of life containing the names of the pious, a careful reading of both the syntax of 3:16 and of the function of the book stated in 3:18 argues strongly against such a model. Rather, this Book of Remembrance is presented as a book given to those fearing YHWH as a guide to help them distinguish the righteous from the wicked, thereby instructing them on their path and preparing them

to survive the refining judgment of the coming day of YHWH.

The Message of Malachi

The message of Malachi reflects a wide range of topics for so brief a writing, perhaps surpassed only by Joel in this respect. Malachi explores, to a greater or lesser extent, five thematic elements that have also played a recurring role in the Book of the Twelve (cultic abuse by priests and people, infertility of the land, the theodicy problem, the day of YHWH, and the ultimate fate of both YHWH's people and the nations).⁴ Malachi's exploration of these themes makes it a fitting conclusion to the corpus, which helps explain why Zechariah 9–14 was inserted after Zechariah 8 and not after Malachi.

Cultic Abuse by People and Priest. Challenges to the way in which the cult is being run represents the most prominent theme in Malachi. Material in Malachi confronts priest and people alike regarding the extent to which both the quality and quantity of material offered to YHWH at the temple reflect poorly on the obedience of both groups. Three primary cultic concerns are raised in Malachi. First, inferior sacrifices are not only brought by the people Judah but are also accepted by the priests (1:6–10, 13–14; 2:1–9), while worship takes place among the nations where YHWH's name receives proper respect (1:11–12). This failure causes YHWH to threaten to dispense with temple sacrifices altogether (1:10). The people bring inferior sacrifices to the temple in their worship of YHWH when they would never dare bring this quality to the Persian governor (1:8). This behavior shows a lack of respect for YHWH (1:6). Second, the people of Judah are accused of infidelity (2:10–16), but it is doubtful that this accusation is merely intended literally. Rather, the corporate nature of these charges reflects prophetic critique of the worship of deities other than YHWH. Finally, Malachi depicts

Malachi Woodcut



The prophet Malachi prophesies to the people of Israel.

Woodcut from Christoph Weigel (1654–1725). *Malachi*. (Credit: Pitts Theology Library, Digital Image Archive, Candler School of Theology, Emory University)

both priests (2:4-5) and people (2:10) as having broken covenant with YHWH.

Infertility of the Land as Punishment from YHWH. The infertility of the land appears as a problem presumed in both halves of the book. This theme appears somewhat muted in the first half of Malachi wherein the curse of God on the land functions more as an impending threat. The people are condemned for withholding the best of what they have more than for suffering from the lack of available sacrificial animals. Malachi presumes that the land's infertility manifests the curse from YHWH (2:2), a curse that appears to be ongoing but threatens to become more severe. This motif reaches its apex in the promise (3:8-11) that follows the call for repentance (3:6-7). In 3:8-11, a positive response will result in rain to water the crops, as well as the removal of the "locusts" who have invaded the land. The double entendre of this threat, when read against Joel, should not be missed. The "devourer" in 3:10 functions as a symbol of both infertility and military occupation. Both have significant impact on the land's ability to feed its people. The logic of testing in 3:6-12 presumes that the land's fertility, its ability to produce enough crops to feed the people, has failed, and that only a return to YHWH will change the situation.

Theodicy Problem Not an Excuse for Disobedience. Another problem presupposed in the second half of Malachi appears embedded in the disputation of 3:13-15 and its resolution in 4:1-3 (MT 3:19-21). Specifically, Malachi's confrontation of the people in this disputation concerns the people's motives for failing to take YHWH seriously. At issue is the prosperity of the wicked, but the slant on this problem initially has more to do with the reaction of the faithful than it does with the condemnation of the wicked. The rhetorical barbs challenge those who are unwilling to wait for YHWH's justice. They see the continuing prosperity of the wicked as evidence against living a life that follows the paths of YHWH. If the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer, how does one profit by following YHWH? Malachi 4:1-3 offers a fairly standard response in Judaism and Christianity by extrapolating a time in the future when YHWH will punish the wicked and reward the righteous.

Two Stages of the Day of YHWH. The day of YHWH in Malachi manifests several characteristics. In 3:1-5, the day of YHWH that will arrive imminently is a terrifying event whose purpose is to sep-

arate the pious remnant from the larger community that is antagonistic or apathetic toward YHWH's commands. Second, the day of YHWH will unfold in two stages. YHWH's messenger will arrive to purify the Levites (3:2b-4). Then, judgment will come against those in the population who break the covenant stipulations (3:5). Third, the result of the judgment will be the deliverance of those fearing YHWH and the destruction of the wicked.

The delay of the day of YHWH also appears to be presumed in two passages. Malachi 3:16-18 anticipates the need for the instruction of the faithful so they might endure until that day comes, while 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) suggests that the coming of Elijah (as the messenger) may yet reconcile families with one another and stave off YHWH's curse. Both of these passages create tension not easily reconciled with the idea of an imminent day of YHWH, but this paradox also becomes a central feature of New Testament eschatology. This polarity causes the reader to hear urgency to live as though the day of YHWH is coming today, but to study and live in faithful obedience because the day of YHWH may come in a future generation.

The Fate of the People and the Fate of the Nations. Three issues deserve mention because they reflect on the eschatological message of Malachi: an openness to the nations, judgment on Judah, and Malachi's canonical awareness. The second half of Malachi deals extensively with the expectations for Judah's priests and people on the coming day of judgment that threatens the land. Interestingly, Malachi does not single out the nations for the same fate but mentions the nations positively as a place where YHWH's name is honored. This rather surprising perspective stands out since the critiques of improper worship are so pervasive.

One must be cautious about constructing a theology of the nations based on the scant references to the nations in the book. Nevertheless, given the strongly confrontational tenor of the material in Malachi, the few places that do mention the nations appear remarkably restrained. Malachi 1:11 assumes that proper worship can be and is being offered among the nations. What the text does not say is who these worshipers are. Given that the criteria for this worship reflect cultic categories, one must assume that this worship refers primarily to Jewish communities among the nations. Malachi 1:11 refers to incense being offered in a particular place and to a "pure" offering being presented. In this respect, one can only say

that Malachi presumes that YHWH can be worshiped among the nations. Malachi does not focus on a mission to the nations. Nevertheless, Malachi 1:14 configures the worship of YHWH among the nations as part of God's dominion as king, which the nations themselves recognize and respect. The lines between these two perspectives are not connected in the sense that Malachi does not provide specific statements regarding who among the nations can or cannot participate in the cultic observances. Malachi only demands that the offerings be pure.

Malachi's day of judgment focuses on Judah, but its terms (e.g., the wicked, the doers of evil) are broad enough to include those worshiping or not worshiping YHWH among the nations. Malachi, though, brings a perspective that transcends sociopolitical entities. Malachi's interest concerns the proper worship of YHWH in Jerusalem, but unlike most prophetic eschatological texts, Malachi 3–4 does not presume that the fate of YHWH's people rests with the fate of the country. Malachi deals with the righteous and the wicked within the land, and even among the priests, because Malachi presumes persons within the borders of Judah will experience judgment or salvation depending on their response to the call to repent and to honor the covenant, not on their biological lineage. To be sure, Malachi conveys a strong sense of election, but this election creates obligations by which YHWH's people will be judged. Those who take the covenant commands seriously will be purified on the coming day of YHWH (3:1–4), while those who disregard them and actively break them will be destroyed (4:1–3 [MT 3:19–21]).

By most estimates, the last material to enter Malachi (4:4–6) demonstrates a keen interest in Malachi's role as the conclusion to the prophetic canon (the Prophets, *Nebi'im*). These verses contain explicit references to the Pentateuch (the *Torah* of my servant Moses), and to Elijah (the most prominent prophet in the Former Prophets). Moreover, the language in the references to Moses alludes to Deuteronomy, the end of the Pentateuch, and to Joshua 1, the beginning of the Former Prophets. Implicitly, though, Malachi makes these connections for didactic and eschatological purposes. The references to the Torah presume an instructional context wherein the act of remembering includes an orientation toward keeping the covenant obligations. The reasons presumed for keeping these covenant obligations, though, have to do with the

anticipated arrival of Elijah before the day of YHWH. The Torah, then, serves to keep the faithful on the right path in preparation for the day of judgment. This combination suggests a particular attitude about how the Torah and the Prophets functioned for the community responsible for transmitting Malachi. It presumes the purpose of the Torah and the Prophets was to provide guidance for those who hoped to endure the day of YHWH. This eschatological purpose involved reflection (remember the *Torah*), fidelity (keeping the statutes and ordinances), and hope for reconciliation between parents and children so that the traditions might pass from generation to generation. It thus provides stability for the future to keep the land from becoming cursed. This combination of the didactic with the eschatological imbues the end of Malachi with a powerful reminder of the importance of the Law and the Prophets for the believing community. It serves to ground the present community in the traditions of the past and to guide that community into the future.

NOTES

1. Erich Bosshard and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, "Maleachi im Zwölfprophetenbuch," *Biblische Notizen* 52 (1990): 27–46.

2. See Jakob Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW 389; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 219–63.

3. *Ibid.*, 247–49.

4. See "Recurring Themes and Motifs" in the chapter on the introduction to the Book of the Twelve in this commentary, as well as James D. Nogalski, "Recurring Themes in the Book of the Twelve: Creating Points of Contact for a Theological Reading," *Int* 61 (2007): 125–36.

OUTLINE OF MALACHI

- I. Malachi 1:1–2:16: Three Disputations on Election, Cultic Improprieties of Priests and People
 - A. 1:1: The Oracle of the Word of YHWH
 - B. 1:2–5: The Love of YHWH and the Election of Jacob
 - C. 1:6–2:9: Failure of the Priests
 - 1. 1:6–10: Accusation

- 2. 1:11-14: Rationale
- 3. 2:1-9: Moment of Choice
- D. 2:10-16: Infidelity of Judah
- II. Malachi 2:17–4:6: The Coming Day of YHWH
 - A. 2:17–3:5: Purification before the Day of YHWH
 - 1. 2:17: Self-absorption
 - 2. 3:1-2a: Judgment on Levites
 - 3. 3:2b-5: Pure offerings
 - B. 3:6-12: Return to Me
 - 1. 3:6-7: YHWH's consistency
 - 2. 3:8-9: Robbing God
 - 3. 3:10-12: Prophetic warning
 - C. 3:13-15: Challenging Theodicy
 - D. 3:16-18: A Book of Remembrance Is Written
 - E. 4:1-3: The Righteous Will Survive the Coming Day
 - F. 4:4-6: Connecting to the Canon

THREE DISPUTATIONS ON ELECTION

Malachi 1:1–2:16

COMMENTARY

Malachi 1–2 comprises four formal units: the superscription (1:1) and three disputations on the part of both the priests and the people (1:2–5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10–16). The disputation genre continues in Malachi 3, but these first three focus on challenging the *current* behavior and attitudes of the people and the priests while those in Malachi 3 shift to the future.

The Oracle of the Word of YHWH, 1:1

The NRSV translates the first three words of the superscription as two headings (“An oracle. The word of the LORD . . .”) rather than follow the MT with a single, albeit somewhat cumbersome, construct chain (“The oracle of the word of YHWH . . .”). The continuation of the superscription mentions “Israel,” as do both Zechariah 9:1 and 12:1, but it differs slightly from both of them in two ways. First, each of the three superscriptions uses a different preposition to introduce the subject matter of the subsequent material. In Malachi 1:1, the preposition “to” (*ʾel*) precedes “Israel,” whereas in Zechariah 12:1 the preposition that precedes “Israel” is “concerning” (*ʿal*), and in Zechariah 9:1 the preposition “against” (*bē*) precedes “the land of Hadrach” and only mentions the “tribes of Israel” later as the possession of YHWH.¹

A second distinctive feature of Malachi 1:1 appears with the assignment of the prophetic messenger using an unusual preposition to indicate the person through whom (*bēyad*) the message was delivered. This preposition, as part of a prophetic superscription to a book or an individual oracle, appears as a superscription elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve only in Haggai 1:1, 3; 2:1. Where it is not part of

a superscription, it also appears five times in Zechariah (4:10, 12; 7:7, 10; 11:6) and once in Joel (4:8). Two instances in Zechariah (7:7, 10) also use this preposition to indicate prophetic instrumentality. In this respect, then, Malachi 1:1 suggests closer proximity to Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 than to Zechariah 9:1 or 12:1.

The identity of Malachi was already a matter of discussion in ancient traditions, as noted by variant readings of the LXX, Targum Jonathon, and rabbinic traditions. (See [\[Malachi in Jewish Tradition\]](#) in the introduction to Malachi.) Today, most interpret “Malachi” as a name, but the fact that it means “my messenger” has caused some to wonder whether this name was an eponym for the figure that is mentioned in Malachi 3:1. No biographical information is provided for the prophet. At any rate, Malachi 1:1 designates the material in Malachi as connected to but distinct from the preceding redactional units of Zechariah 9–11; 12–14. By naming a prophetic figure, the editors have placed Malachi on par with the other writings of the Book of the Twelve associated with a prophetic personage.

The Love of YHWH and the Election of Jacob, 1:2-5

Malachi 1:2-5 constitutes the first in a series of six speech units (1:2-5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10-16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13-21 [Eng. 3:13–4:3]) that are generally classified as disputations. These units provide the framework for Malachi, though the end of Malachi (4:4-5) is generally treated as a postscript and the disputational character actually ends with 3:15. The prophetic disputation typically begins with a statement or a question that constitutes the issue under discussion. The speaker then articulates the counter argument before explaining why the counter argument fails. In the case of Malachi 1:2-5, the disputed issue concerns the claim that YHWH loves Israel. The counter argument comes from the people in the form of a question (“but you [2mp] say, how have you loved us?”). Subsequently, the first disputation in Malachi 1:2b-4 uses the fate of Esau/Edom to illustrate YHWH’s love of Israel before 1:5 claims that the people of Israel will see this downfall come about as a proof of YHWH’s love.

The rhetorical structure of Malachi 1:2-5 reflects a series of three pairs of interconnected lines that alternate with an A/B/B/A parallelism by which the disputation unfolds. [\[Structure of Malachi 1:2-5\]](#) The

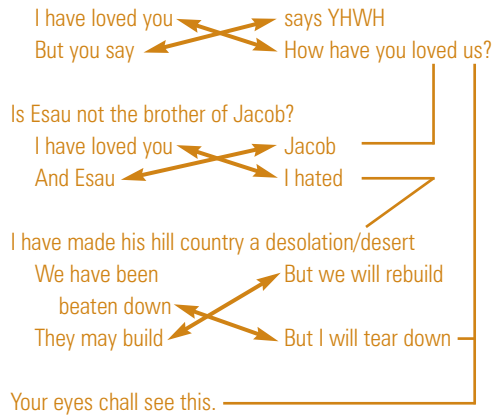
opening pair of parallel lines states the thesis of the dispute, then contrasts that thesis with the people's counter argument introduced with an interrogative. YHWH then answers the people's question with a question, which is then followed by a second pair of lines that contrast YHWH's love of Jacob with his hatred of Esau. The reference to "love" connects back to the first pair of lines and moves the disputation forward. Next, 1:3b provides the concrete explication of hatred for Esau when YHWH claims to have decimated the hill country of Esau. A dialogue within the disputation follows in the third pair of parallel lines when Edom, the political descendant of Esau, claims the setback is only temporary; YHWH then responds that he will tear down anything they attempt to rebuild. Finally, the disputation's conclusion brings the targeted audience back into the discussion by affirming the people will see YHWH's greatness beyond the borders of Israel. This final statement thus reconfirms the coming desolation of Esau/Edom, which at the same time serves, rhetorically, as the confirmation of YHWH's love of Jacob.

This disputation has frequently given rise to speculation concerning the political situation at the time the disputation was written. Specifically, it appears to presume a point after a significant defeat of Edom by some unnamed enemy. Usually, this defeat has been assumed to reflect the Nabatean incursion into Edomite territory in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest of the region. This association has been challenged, but no clear alternative has been suggested. By the end of the Hellenistic period, Idumea (the Greek name for Edom) had become a province in the southern part of the land that used to belong to Judah, while Edom in the preexilic period lay further east. This fact suggests a protracted period of relocation in which the Edomites moved into land vacated by Judah. It remains unclear whether the Edomites moved to escape Nabatean incursions into their own land or whether the Edomites moved out before the Nabateans entered.

Structure of Malachi 1:2-5

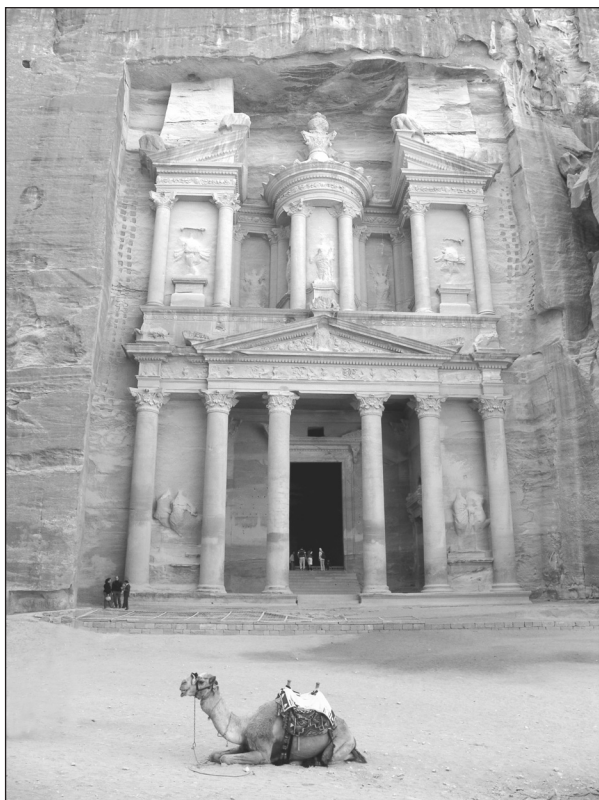


The lines show the pairings of the ABBA elements.



Edomites and Nabateans

See [Edom in Biblical Tradition] in the introduction to Obadiah for a historical survey of Edom and the Nabateans. The treasury building pictured here represents one of the monumental achievements of the ancient world. Built by the Nabateans, probably beginning in the first century BCE, this impressive structure was used in the filming of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.



(Credit: Jim Pitts)

Malachi 1:2 speaks of the love of YHWH, the first time this verb has been used in the Book of the Twelve since the opening passages of Hosea. It has been suggested that evoking this theme constitutes a deliberate attempt to frame the Book of the Twelve with this theme.²

The reference in 1:3 to “his hill country” (lit., “his mountains”) refers to the mountainous region southeast of Judah. In this respect it presumes the traditional homeland of Edom, one known for its mountainous terrain (see Obad 3, 8). The language in Malachi 1:2-5 suggests that the process of migration into former Judean territory was not yet complete at the point when this disputation was recorded. In fact, Edomite occupation of territory that had formerly belonged to Judah belies the logic of the disputation itself. The entire rationale for using the fate of Esau/Edom as the example implies, necessarily, that

the composer of this disputation believed that the recent loss of *Edomite* territory was a sign of YHWH’s judgment on Edom. Such a reading of a disaster that had befallen Edom would turn out to be, in any kind of literal understanding, short-lived since Edom eventually took over territory that had belonged to Judah.

Malachi 1:3-4 can be interpreted as a literary allusion to Obadiah 3-4, for the two passages are linked by several verbal and tradition-historical ideas. First, the castigation of Edom using the patronym “Esau” is unusual in prophetic texts, occurring only in these two passages and in Jeremiah 49:8, 10. This Jeremiah text, however, is closely connected to the same passage from which Obadiah 1-5 draws its message (see the commentary on Obadiah and its rela-

tionship to Jeremiah). Nowhere else does Esau appear in prophetic texts. Second, the topos of the mountains of Esau appears both in Malachi and in Obadiah. Third, both texts play off the idea of the rebuilding of Edom. This allusion is not accidental but connects a text that anticipates Edom's destruction in the distant future (Obadiah) with another that presumes that punishment has begun (Mal 1:3–4). One finds this same kind of literary connectedness in the role of Edom in the book of Isaiah, where Isaiah 34:5–17 anticipates the eventual punishment of Edom and Isaiah 63:1–7 presents a theophany in which the warrior YHWH defeats Edom in battle.

The unit culminates in 1:5 with an affirmation of two important statements. First, it emphasizes the imminence of Edom's destruction by telling the community that it will see Edom's destruction. Second, the final statement accentuates the claim that YHWH's power extends beyond the borders of Israel. This affirmation plays a role in the second disputation as well (see 1:11–14), and it represents an important element in postexilic texts as the implications of monotheism continued to develop. In its early narratives, Israel struggled with the exclusive worship of YHWH. In later prophetic texts, Israel explored the implications of YHWH as a universal God more fully.

CONNECTIONS

Malachi 1:2–5 presupposes an attitude of YHWH's election of Israel. The doctrine of election has fallen from favor for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet a great deal of biblical material in both Testaments relies on some form of election. A 2007 work by Joel S. Kaminsky attempts to reopen dialogue concerning the nature of election in a postmodern world.³ He attributes the decline of the popularity of election among moderns to the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza and Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment goal of universality. At the core of his argument lie several critiques of this Enlightenment goal. (1) Kaminsky shows how deeply ingrained the idea of election, or favored status, is within biblical material. (2) He wants, however, to avoid two problems: supersessionism, in which Christians claim to have replaced Israel as God's chosen people; and a universality that has no place for God's choosing of individuals and/or peoples for par-

ticular purposes. (3) Kaminsky argues that the biblical material is not dualistic, but that the biblical concept of election deals with

The Mystery of God's Action



The role of human unawareness in God's salvific plan that transpires through divine inaction is dramatically portrayed at the end of the Joseph story, where Joseph reassures his brothers after the death of Jacob, their father: "Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today'" (Gen 50:18-20).

Though the narrative account of the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers in Gen 37 does not specify God as being involved in Joseph's abduction, Joseph attributes divine involvement in the events that brought him to Egypt.

three categories: the elect, the anti-elect, and the non-elect. While any of these three categories can be treated inappropriately, Kaminsky claims that a balance of the three provides several important insights into a biblical perspective that recognizes the complexities of election and how it plays out in the narratives. For example, he uses the story of Ishmael to illustrate that the non-elect may still receive blessings from YHWH.

Further, the stories of Genesis go on to show that the elect often faces danger—danger that sometimes arises from the elect's own sense of entitlement (such as in the stories of Jacob and Joseph), from another's jealousy (e.g., Sarah and Hagar in Gen 16; and obliquely with Ishmael

and Isaac in Gen 21:9), or simply from God's greater purpose (e.g., in the Joseph story; see Gen 45:4-7; 50:19-20). These stories indicate that fulfilling one's role as elect may or may not involve human

Jacob's Prayer



The night before Jacob meets with Esau, and just before his famous wrestling match with God, Gen 32:9-12 recounts Jacob's prayer, where the realization of his own insignificance dawns on him:

⁹And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹²Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

action in order to bring YHWH's purpose to fruition. [The Mystery of God's Action] These stories also critique characters who have not understood that election is not to be used for self-aggrandizement, a lesson learned finally by Jacob as is evident in Jacob's prayer as he faces his encounter with Esau upon his return from Mesopotamia. [Jacob's Prayer] Immaturity often leads the characters to use their status for their own benefit. "Rather, election reaches its fruition in a humble, yet exalted, divine service that benefits the elect and the non-elect alike."⁴ He argues that Israel's election plays a mediating role for the nations but warns against certain Christian interpretations that suggest Israel's role as mediator was simply that of placeholder until Christianity came along. (4) Finally, in noting

the prevalence of election throughout biblical material, Kaminsky shows how closely it connects with other theological motifs, espe-

cially providence and covenant. It is this last element that connects most closely with the assumptions one finds in Malachi 1:2-5.

Despite Kaminsky's insights into the pervasive role of election, and probably because of his own interest in putting this topic back into discussion, he underestimates the dark side of this theological conundrum. Whereas Kaminsky, in working from the Jacob-Esau narratives in Genesis, can benignly classify Esau as one of the non-elect, Malachi 1:2-5 hardly portrays the Edomites as such. In the rhetoric of this passage, Esau is treated as one of the non-elect whose subjugation (temporary though it may be) becomes the rhetorical evidence for God's love of Jacob. To be sure, the text probably assumes that Esau/Edom has perpetrated violence against Judah. However, justice is not the issue in Malachi 1:2-5, where the punishment of Edom constitutes proof of YHWH's love for Jacob. A focus on the elect, in ancient and modern times, tends to be used to justify the self-interests of those who consider themselves elect in God's eyes. This holds true in biblical texts, in history, and in life as we know it. It matters little whether the chosen ones consider themselves Israelites, modern Jews, Christians, or Muslims. When a group, or powerful individuals, think of themselves as chosen by God for special status, other groups (be they non-elect or anti-elect) will suffer at their hands. Without some kind of serious check and balance, the elect will sooner or later morph into self-indulgent masters. Kaminsky, to his credit, offers correctives to the abuses embedded in biblical teaching. These correctives include the recognition of how characters misunderstand the favor bestowed on them by God, the recognition that God tends to show favor to those whom society marginalizes, and the need to recognize that election is a call to serve on God's behalf, not to be a privileged child of God. Nevertheless, theological paradigms with a strong emphasis on election tend to justify the status quo as part of God's plan more often than they change behavior to fit God's expectations.

In this respect, it is probably no accident that much of the remainder of Malachi deals precisely with this dark side of election. The prophet devotes the next disputation to confronting the priests who have forgotten their call to service and who, seeing their role as privileged and divinely ordained, have disregarded the conditions of their covenant with God.

NOTES

1. See the discussions of Zech 9:1 and 12:1 for a more complete description of these differences.

2. See John Watts, “Hosea 1–3 and Malachi,” in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (Symposium 15; ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) 209–17.

3. Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

4. *Ibid.*, 78.

FAILURE OF THE PRIESTS

Malachi 1:6–2:9

COMMENTARY

Malachi 1:6–2:9 constitutes the second disputation. This disputation differs from the first thematically and in terms of its addressee. Whereas 1:2-5 spoke in generic terms to the listener, 1:6 addresses this new disputation specifically to the priests. While the confrontational tone of this unit is quite clear, the pointed nature of the critique becomes even more evident when one realizes that many of the key words and phrases of this text result from its critique of the priests by reversing the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23-27. [Reversing Numbers 6:23-27 in Malachi 1:6–2:9] The rhetorical flow of the disputation unfolds more clearly when one notes that the three subunits of the disputation (1:6-10, 11-14, 2:1-9) serve different purposes and use different rhetorical strategies to convey their points. None of the

Reversing Numbers 6:23-27 in Malachi 1:6–2:9



Lexical repetition is noticeable between Num 6:24-37 and Mal 1:6–2:9.

Numbers 6:24-27

- ²⁴The LORD bless you
and keep (*šmr*) you;
²⁵the LORD illuminate (*yṯr*)
his face upon you,
and be gracious to you;
²⁶the LORD lift up his face upon you,
and give you peace.
²⁷So they shall put my name on the Israelites,
and I will bless them.

Malachi 1:6–2:9

- 2:2: I will curse your blessings
2:9: You have not kept (*šmr*) my paths
1:10: Do not kindle (*yṯr*) my altar
1:9: Entreat the face of God . . .
1:9 that he may be gracious to us
1:8: Will (YHWH) raise your face?
2:5 My covenant was . . . for peace
1:6: You priests despise my name
1:11: My name is great among the nations

M. Fishbane has demonstrated the extent to which Mal 1:6-2:9 takes up the language of the priestly blessing of Num 6:23-27 and transforms it exegetically into a “vitriolic critique” of the priests’ behavior. Every key phrase in Num 6:23-27 has a counterpart in Mal 1:6–2:9, but the rhetoric of Mal 1:6–2:9 shows how the priests have failed to provide the priestly blessings anticipated in Num 6:23-27. Seen in this light, the rhetoric of Mal 1:6–2:9 becomes even more pointed because it repudiates the very essence of what the priests should be doing.

three subunits operates independently of the other two, but they emphasize different aspects of a confrontation: the accusation (1:6-10), the rationale (1:11-14), and the moment of choice (2:1-9).

Malachi 1:6-10: Accusation. The accusation begins with an aphorism about honor, essentially anticipating the accusations of the larger unit: the priests' behavior does not show YHWH proper respect. The content that follows in the rest of the unit confronts the priests for conducting sacrifices improperly, and the logic makes sense as a confrontation of priests whose lax practices, in the mind of the writer, make a mockery of cultic requirements. Beginning with an opening statement about the need to show proper respect to one's superiors, the rhetorical logic develops from a series of nine rhetorical questions (though only eight appear in the NRSV). Sometimes one question is answered by another question; sometimes a question's answer is merely implied; and sometimes the question is answered directly. [The Use of Interrogatives in the Rhetorical Structure of Malachi 1:6-10] The goal of the questions in this unit is to challenge the behavior of the priests who, according to the speaker, are accepting animals for sacrifice that do not meet the criteria for acceptable offerings because the animals are sick or deformed. Thus, the prophet challenges the priests, not the givers, because it is the priests' responsibility to determine whether or not the animals are suitable. In pragmatic terms, in tough economic times one can readily understand how people would be tempted to slide by, to bring animals that they could not sell or use for meat themselves, or they could have been convinced that priests were allowing the participants latitude though they were indeed capable of providing better quality sacrifices. Also, since the priests relied on portions of the meat offered for sacrifice, one could understand how some priests felt obligated to accept sacrificial offerings that did not meet cultic standards; they themselves needed food to eat. Malachi 1:6-10, however, challenges this kind of thinking on theological grounds. To the author, giving less than the best to YHWH is an affront to YHWH's dignity and shows a lack of respect.

Reference to the altar in 1:7 presupposes that the temple is once again functioning. A few have suggested that the term could refer to the outdoor altar that was purportedly rebuilt shortly after the first wave of exiles returned following the decree of Cyrus in 538 BCE, before the temple was reconstructed (see Ezra 3:1-7). These

The Use of Interrogatives in the Rhetorical Structure of Malachi 1:6-10

ΑΩ

Opening Statement:

A son honors his father, and servants their master.

Two questions:

1. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me?

2. And if I am the master, where is the respect due me?

Questions 1 and 2 follow one upon the other and relate to the opening statement, but apply it to YHWH.

3. You say, "how have we despised your name?"

4. And you say, "how have we polluted it?"

Questions 3 and 4 are answered directly with declarative statements.

5. When you offer blind animals . . . is that not wrong?

6. And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong?

Question 6 follows immediately upon number 5. Both questions assume the hearer knows the answer is yes.

7. Will he (the governor) be pleased with you or show you favor?

8. Will he (YHWH) show favor to any of you?

Questions 7 and 8 are preceded by commands to present the sacrifice to the governor and YHWH. The questions assume a negative response.

Concluding Question:

9. Who among you would shut the temple doors so as not to light my altar in vain?

Two Concluding Statements:

I have no pleasure in you.

I will not accept an offering from your hands.

The concluding statements urge the priests to change their behavior beginning with a final question that functions as an accusation and ending with YHWH's rejection of the priests for their behavior.

arguments, however, have not won many supporters. The impression given in most of Malachi is that the problems lay with *how* the offerings were given. It is doubtful that this line of reasoning would have been used if there were no temple to support the priests and the cult when the core material of Malachi was composed.

One should not miss the cultic connotations of the terms in 1:7. The phrase translated as "polluted food" by the NRSV literally means "desecrated bread." The two words for "polluted" are a *pu'al* participle (*mēgōâl*) and *pi'el* perfect (*gē'alnûkâ*) forms of the verb *g'l*. *Pu'al* forms of this verb appear in several exilic and postexilic texts (Mal 1:7, 12; Ezra 2:62; Neh 7:64; Isa 59:3; and Lam 4:14), generally in contexts of ritual desecration.

Reference in 1:8 to those offering animals that are blind, lame, or sick does have a material parallel in Leviticus 22:17-25. That passage in Leviticus lays out a series of examples of unacceptable

sacrifices, including those that are blind, maimed, or having a discharge (Lev 22:22). However, even here Malachi 1:8 differs in how it describes the maladies. First, Malachi uses the adjective “blind,” while Leviticus 22:22 uses the noun “blindness.” As well, Malachi’s use of “lame” and “sick” summarizes the more concrete descriptions in Leviticus 22:22, though the order is essentially the same. Specifically, Leviticus 22:22 uses two terms (“injured or maimed”) instead of the broad term “lame” in Malachi 1:8, implying any physical imperfection due to injury. Moreover, while Malachi 1:8 mentions animals that are “sick,” Leviticus 22:22 describes the signs of the sickness more graphically (having a discharge or an itch or scabs). The term used for “lame” (*pissēah*) appears in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 15:21) in reference to animals unacceptable for sacrifice, while in the Levitical Code it is used of persons unfit to serve in the cult. None of the law codes use the term “sick” (*ḥālāh*), which appears in Malachi 1:8, 13. In short, while these terms reflect traditional cultic expectations, they do not clearly indicate one specific code for their formulation.

Malachi 1:9 begins with a sarcastic command to entreat God’s favor on behalf of the people, but it immediately turns into an accusation by stating that the fault lies with the priests, meaning that YHWH will not show favor toward their petitions. This construction, “implore the favor of God/YHWH,” also appears in Zechariah 7:2; 8:21–22, where it functions as part of a promise portraying Jerusalem as the place where the nations will come to entreat the favor of YHWH.¹ By reading Zechariah 7–8 with Malachi 1:6–10 (11–14) one can see a dramatic change, a deterioration of the plight of the addressees in the two passages. Zechariah 7–8 calls for renewed commitment to YHWH as proof of a change of heart. The prophet admonishes the people to note that things have begun changing for the better, but sustained commitment from them will be necessary if all the promises are to come to fruition (see commentary to 8:9–12 in particular). Malachi assumes a functioning temple and thus has moved the reader to a later stage in the ongoing prophetic compendium, but the situation is troubling. There is no sign that the admonition of Zechariah 8 has taken hold. Rather, the people are bringing defective offerings and the priests are enabling them. Malachi 1:6–10 assumes the priests’ prayers are ineffectual, meaning that the situation will remain bleak until and unless the priests (and the people) change their behaviors.

In Malachi 1:10, the prophetic speech changes to first person divine speech in order to accentuate YHWH's rejection of the current state of affairs. YHWH asks, "Who is there among you that will close the doors so that you do not light my altar in vain?" The reader intuitively responds that no one will do so. The word for "doors" here can refer to gates or to doors on structures, but probably should be understood as the doors to the entire temple compound rather than just the temple structure since the altar used for animal sacrifice was located in the courtyard while the incense altar was located inside the temple structure itself. Given that the issue concerned the offering of defective animals in 1:8, the gates here would be those into the courtyard. At any rate, the accusation in 1:6–10 illustrates negligence on the part of the priests.

Malachi 1:11–14. The second subunit of 1:6–2:9 begins and ends with a statement regarding the greatness/reverence of YHWH's name among the nations. While this subunit, like 1:6–10, accuses the priests of specific deeds (see 1:12–13), the triple use of the conjunction "because" (*kî*) in 1:11 (2xs) and 1:14 emphasizes the character of 1:11–14 as the rationale for correcting this behavior.

Identifying these worshipers proves difficult. [YHWH Worshipers among the Nations] Malachi 1:11–14 depends on the previous discussion, but despite the *inclusio* setting the verses off as a subsection, several commentators have seen this passage, or portions of it, as an intrusion into the logic of the disputation.² Recent redactional studies have tended to assign portions of these verses to the reworkings of the foundational material in Malachi.³ Rhetorically, however, it is difficult to find convincing criteria for excising portions of these verses from one another because of the syntactical and verbal elements uniting the verses.

Malachi 1:11 connects to 1:6–10 with a causal conjunction (*kî*), accentuating the radical nature of the confrontation in those verses. When one reads 1:10–11 together, the rationale for YHWH's command becomes clear: close the temple doors *because* my name

YHWH Worshipers among the Nations



Various theories have been put forward regarding the intended identity of those offering sacrifices among the nations in 1:11–14. The differences of opinion largely rest on two questions: (1) Does one interpret these actions as present and ongoing, or as references to an eschatological goal of the prophet? (2) Are these worshipers considered Jews (living) among the nations or foreigners who come to recognize YHWH as God? These two questions are not unrelated, but the answers one presumes do have implications for interpreting the text. Those who see these verses as references to foreigners (i.e., non-Jews) tend to postulate that the text refers to future events (see KJV, NIV, NAS). By contrast, those who see the worshipers as Jews living among the nations tend to see the actions as descriptive of worship behavior of communities outside Judah and Jerusalem, perhaps even early forms of synagogues or other sites where YHWH was worshiped (see NRSV, RSV, TNK).

For discussion of scholars who take various positions on this issue, see James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993) 194–95 (especially footnote 45).

is honored among the nations. Malachi 1:12 contrasts the actions of the pure offerings among the nations with the improper sacrifices of the priests in Jerusalem. The language in Malachi 1:12–13 suggests that the prophet confronts priests who are not satisfied with their allotment from the temple. This segment continues to denounce the priests who are treating their responsibilities with contempt (cf. 1:6–10), but the connection to 1:11 specifically increases the contrast between those in the nations who worship YHWH and the priests of YHWH's own temple. Malachi 1:13 continues directly from 1:12 by describing the actions of the priests. Malachi 1:13 reiterates YHWH's rejection of these priests, drawing on the same language as 1:8 but adding stolen sacrifices to the list of improper items accepted by the priests. The verse implies that priests have knowingly participated in accepting animals they knew were taken from someone else by force. The rhetorical question at the end of 1:13 implies a negative response. YHWH will not accept these animals as valid sacrifices. Malachi 1:14 then pronounces what sounds like an aphorism that turns into an accusation against these priests *because* they have failed to recognize YHWH as king and have dishonored YHWH's name among the nations. While many have noted that Malachi 1:11–14 stands out contextually, it represents the principle by which the priests' actions are condemned. They bring shame on the name of YHWH, in YHWH's own temple.

Malachi 1:14 also changes the focus from the priest who allows the sacrifice to the person making the sacrifice. However, one should not necessarily treat this verse as a thematic intrusion since it can also be interpreted as the rationale for the preceding excursus. Malachi 1:14 functions essentially as a curse on anyone attempting to cheat YHWH. Within the context of 1:12–13, the proverbial saying beginning 1:14 functions as an accusation against these same priests, followed immediately by the rationale introduced by the conjunction *kî* (for, because). YHWH's kingship and the need to show reverence to the true king represent expectations for behavior that clash demonstrably with the practices of the priests heretofore described. In this light, Malachi 1:14 assumes that anyone participating in the sacrifices knowingly would be just as guilty of deception as the one bringing the sacrifice.

For the third time in Malachi, the prophetic voice in 1:14 cites the universality of YHWH's reign when confronting the people

(1:5) and the priests (1:11, 14). This logic raises an interesting truism regarding the intellectual milieu of the Persian period. Increasingly, economic and political circumstances caused those in Judah to become more aware of the implications of the monotheistic theology that was taking hold. YHWH could no longer be conceived as merely the God of the land of Judah and/or Israel. If the claims of Yahwistic power were to make any sense at all, then YHWH had to be God of all creation. Given the likelihood that it was by now clear that Jewish communities would remain in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, and in Asia Minor, the claims of 1:11 and 1:14 take on added significance. The tasks that the priests were expected to perform, in this case, were not the only acts of devotion being offered in the name of YHWH. In a real sense, the offering of incense and grain (1:11) by followers of YHWH among the nations emphasizes the rhetorical point of 1:12–14: YHWH is not dependent on the priests. If these priests are unable or unwilling to perform their duties according to standards befitting YHWH, then they become unnecessary. This theme will become the central focus of the final subunit of 1:6–2:9.

Malachi 2:1–9. As the third and final subunit of the second disputation, Malachi 2:1–9 continues the confrontation with the priests that began in 1:6. Formally, YHWH continues as the speaker through 2:9, after which the prophet begins to refer to YHWH in the third person as a new disputation begins. The priests are mentioned as the addressee specifically in 2:1, as in 1:6.

Significantly for the line of thought of the larger unit, 2:1–9 focuses less on the accusations described in 1:6–10 or the rationale suggested by 1:11–14. Rather, its rhetorical logic accentuates the consequences of the priestly behavior; that is, if it continues. [Rhetorical Logic of Malachi 2:1–9] This subunit emphasizes the present when it begins with “and now,” followed by the indirect object “to you.” The direct address of the priests combined with the adverb “now” emphasizes the importance of what is about to come. The word “commandment” (*miṣwâh*) can be used of one human com-

Rhetorical Logic of Malachi 2:1–9



The rhetorical flow of 2:1–9 does not rely on interrogatives to make its point.

- 2:1 Introduction
- 2:2 If . . . then curse and accusation
- 2:3–4 Rejection of descendants and priests *because* of the covenant with Levi
- 2:5–6 Reminiscence of Levi, the ideal priest
- 2:7 The role of true priests as the messenger of YHWH
- 2:8–9 Accusation of corruption and verdict of rejection

Rather, the bulk of the material confronts the priests with consequences of a curse by portraying Levi as the model ancestor, followed by a statement defining the role of the ideal priest and by direct accusation of priestly corruption.

manding another, but in the Pentateuch, as here, it always refers to YHWH's commandments. Nevertheless, what follows is not a command from YHWH in the formal sense, since no imperative appears again until chapter 3 (3:7, 10; 4:4 [MT 3:22]). Instead, the remainder of the unit, 2:2-9, reflects on the integrity of the priests using a curse. The curse is contingent on the response of the priests, who are listening. It begins with an "if . . . then" conditional clause in 2:2: "If you will not listen [. . .] then I will send the curse."

Malachi 2:2 reflects two different perspectives. On the one hand, the "if . . . then" statement that begins the verse reflects a confrontation that allows for change on the part of those being confronted. On the other hand, 2:2b indicates that the consequences of the curse have already begun to take place. So how does one negotiate an offer that has already expired? The answer is not so clear. What is clear is that the way one accounts for these different perspectives affects how one interprets the entire subunit. One group of scholars essentially deals with the final text as it stands, and thus either (1) interprets the change as a deliberate rhetorical device to heighten the importance of the issue or (2) downplays the significance of the change in perspective.⁴ Another group of scholars explains the variation as the work of the editor who is collecting and reformulating the source material.⁵

Malachi 2:3 depicts the consequences of the curse using some of the most graphic anthropomorphic language in the Old Testament: YHWH will personally defile the priests by slapping excrement from the sacrificial animals onto their faces. David L. Petersen reads 1:3 over against texts describing priestly ordination and other ritual activity where the specific word for "excrement" appears (Exod 29:14; Lev 4:11; 8:17; 16:27; Num 19:5) in which the excrement from the intestines of the sacrifices is removed from the temple and burned outside the temple complex.⁶ By contrast, Malachi 2:3 depicts a scenario where fecal matter applied to the priests makes them impure, thus causing them to be removed from YHWH's presence. In this sense, Petersen sees a similar dynamic to that described by Michael Fishbane, who treats Malachi 1:6–2:9 as a reversal of the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23-27.⁷

The conditional nature of the disputation emerges again in 2:4 when YHWH avers a hope that the "covenant with Levi" will hold. Jeremiah 33:19-22 is the only other place in the Old Testament

that specifically refers to a covenant with the Levites.⁸ [Levites] Both Malachi 2:4-8 and Jeremiah 33:19-22 (which is part of an MT expansion [33:14-26] that has no LXX parallel) refer to a covenant with Levi that will endure into perpetuity, though in Malachi its existence is in danger of being revoked by YHWH because of the behavior of the priests. No passage defines this “covenant” explicitly, but one can logically assume that the language of “covenant” derives from the promise to Levi and Levitical responsibilities described in Deuteronomy 18:1-8. This promise is presented as enduring, providing Levites with a special status giving them food from the sacrifices—meat as well as grain, wine, and oil. In exchange for their becoming ministers for YHWH’s people, they will minister in the name of YHWH but not receive territorial land, for YHWH will be deemed their inheritance. The threat in Malachi 2:4 is that the promise will no longer continue.

Malachi 2:5 paints a picture of Levi as the ideal priest who was promised life and peace in return for reverence before the name of YHWH. This picture of the ideal progenitor contrasts markedly with the actions of priests whose reverence is at issue because they “despise” the name of YHWH (1:6). Here, it becomes important to consider what kind of internecine conflict Malachi assumes. Is this a case of a prophet condemning the actions of priests? Or does this castigation presume a conflict between two different priestly groups (the Zadokites/Aaronids and the Levites)? [Priestly Conflict]

Precisely the scenario of priestly factions seems to explain best the tension between Malachi and the priests. The speaker in Malachi 2:5 is not challenging a priest’s right to function as priest. Rather, the speaker castigates the priests for not living up to the ideal of Levi. Assuming that Malachi indeed speaks as part of a group (see discussion of 3:16-18), it seems more likely that the speaker challenges the accommodation of the priests as a betrayal of what they

Levites



The role of the Levites appears differently in different parts of the canon. The Levites play a distinctive role in Deuteronomistic literature, Priestly texts, the book of Ezekiel, and Chronicles. Many Deuteronomistic texts use the term “Levites” (and Levitical priests) to mean a priest in Israel (e.g., Deut 12:12, 18-19; 14:27-29). Passages in this line of tradition do not share the same perspective toward the Levites as those from Ezekiel, Priestly texts, and Chronicles since the last three groups of texts treat Levites as secondary clerics. Ezekiel (40:46; 43:19; 44:15) distinguishes between the Levites in general and the sons of Zadok, with only the latter being given responsibility over rites of sacrifice at the altar. The Priestly tradition tends to distinguish the Priests, who are descendants of Aaron, from the Levites, who are set apart for special cultic service but do not conduct the sacrificial services (see Num 8:5-22). 1–2 Chronicles agree with Priestly traditions that Levites do temple service but not the sacrifices. However, in 1–2 Chronicles, one finds a much broader array of functionaries called Levites, including singers (1 Chr 9:33) and bakers (1 Chr 9:31-32). These diverse functions reflect the lengthy history and changing fortunes of the Levites. For further reading, see Robert Kugler, “Levi, Levites,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 3:642–43.

Priestly Conflict



Recent investigations of Malachi have split on the issue of whether Malachi represents a prophetic critique of priests or an inter-priestly conflict. J. O'Brien's careful investigation has shown how problematic it can be to rely on consensus and claim that a clear, unqualified decision is possible based solely on the text. O'Brien refutes the conventional wisdom that Malachi represented a dispute between two parties in which the sons of Aaron gradually displaced the Levites as priests. She demonstrates that Malachi draws its terminology from both the Priestly and the Deuteronomic strands of the Pentateuch, and most likely after they had been combined. Further, she shows that Malachi does not use the term "priests" or "sons of Levi" in a manner that is consistent with either one of those traditions. She goes on to aver, however, that Malachi (along with other non-Pentateuchal texts) "used terms for the priesthood less precisely than do Pentateuchal sources" (146).

Still, it is hard to escape the sense that Malachi is speaking in more than purely individualistic terms. Instead, the voice of Malachi represents the interests of some group in the Persian period. A. H. J. Gunneweg has put forward a complex picture of the vicissitudes of the role of Levites in the postexilic period. This model,

especially in the way he explains conflicting genealogies, explains the tension between the speaker and the priest better than the idea of a completely ambiguous debate. In Gunneweg's model, the power of the Aaronides continued to grow in the postexilic period, but their tactics changed with respect to the Levites.

The Priestly source distinguished between the sons of Aaron and the Levites, and early in the postexilic period it emphasized descent from Aaron as proof of priestly bona fides. This group soon realized, however, that traditions associating the priesthood with Levi ran too deep to be easily expunged. As a result, they too began stressing their relationship to Levi. In short, both groups claimed to be descended from Levi. Nevertheless, the tensions remained between these two priestly groups, with the priests maintaining control of the cultic sacrifices while the Levites were relegated to a second-tier clerical status (guarding the gates, working with the choir guilds, overseeing purity requirements, etc.).

Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, *Leviten und Priester: Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kultpersonals* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1965); Eric M. Meyers, "Priestly Language in the Book of Malachi," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 225–37.

claim as their Levitic heritage. In this scenario, Malachi most likely had sympathy for the Levites and may have been one himself, whereas those who were accepting defective sacrifices would probably have defended their actions differently than the way they are portrayed by Malachi. The departure of these priests from traditional regulations would have been particularly galling to the Levites who at one time would have performed sacrifices according to these very regulations. Malachi's critique of the cult is the critique of an insider becoming an outsider, as one who sees things being done differently than they should.

The parallelism of 2:6 combines two pairs of lines that praise the speech and the lifestyle of Levi and that use antithetical parallelism. The first pair characterizes Levi's speech as true instruction (*tôrâ*) in his mouth with the lack of injustice on his lips. This merism communicates that when Levi spoke, people could have confidence he was telling the truth. The second pair of lines contrasts the way that he walked with YHWH in peace and uprightness, which caused many to turn from iniquity. This pair communicates that the role of the priest is to lead by example. By implication, had Levi

not lived a life of integrity, others would have fallen prey to transgression on their journey. Subtly, this characterization also functions as an accusation since the text has already accused the priests of failing to live and speak with integrity. These implications are drawn more clearly in 2:7.

Malachi 2:7 makes explicit the connection between the ideal ancestor and the role of the priest by reversing the order of the lips and mouth mentioned in 2:6. The speaking role of the priest includes imparting knowledge and instruction (*tôrâ*) so that, like Levi, many will come to him believing that he speaks for YHWH. The phrasing in 2:7 describes the priestly role as conservator and conveyor of religious tradition. Many seek help from the priests because the priest functions as a mediator between themselves and God. Malachi 2:7 uses the word messenger (*mal'ak*) here for priests. The word often refers to YHWH's heavenly messengers (in which case it is usually translated as "angel"), and it is used to refer to prophets as messengers (Hag 1:13; Isa 44:26; 2 Chr 36:15; see also Obad 1) and other humans, but not typically to priests. It is appropriate here because it links the teaching role of the priest with what should be the source of the knowledge conveyed: YHWH. Thus, while 2:5-6 characterized the priestly progenitor Levi in idealized terms, 2:7 states the principle behind the teaching of the priest. This task should involve the reliable transmission of tradition because people depend on the priests for this knowledge in the belief that it comes from YHWH.

While 2:7 conveys the principle of what a priest should be and do, 2:8 contrasts the principle with an accusation that the priests have done the opposite of what Levi taught and lived according to 2:6. Levi walked in integrity, but 2:8 accuses the priests of turning aside from the way. Levi caused many to turn away from iniquity because of true instruction, but 2:8 accuses the priests of causing many to stumble by the corruption of their instruction. In other

Priests and Levites



Moses instructs the Levites that their inheritance shall be what is sacrificed to God.

"Moses calls in the priests to give them their inheritance." From Friedrich Peypus, *Biblia Sacra Utriusque Testamenti: iuxta Veterem Translationem*. (Credit: Pitts Theological Library)

words, the verse charges the priests with failing to perform their responsibilities reliably, truthfully, or faithfully because they have substituted their own instruction for instruction that comes from YHWH. One cannot overstate the powerful rhetorical significance of the verse. It accuses the priests of doing exactly the opposite of what they should be doing. Instead of mediating the word of YHWH, they have substituted their own corrupt ideas.

It should be noted that Malachi 2:8 does not reject priesthood in general nor condemn the cult as a whole. Rather, the entire passage accuses the priests in charge because they have failed to fulfill their role properly. This accusation makes sense when read as coming from one whose sympathy or whose identity lies with the Levites. Malachi represents a group who is keenly aware of priestly traditions but who sees those traditions as having been co-opted by priests who do not follow them. Malachi's group is powerless to change the priests' behavior, but it does not shrink from challenging it. This action is subversive toward those in power because it accuses the priests of having failed their responsibility to their people and, more important, to YHWH.

Following the broadly framed accusation against the priests in 2:8, YHWH pronounces the verdict against those priests in 2:9. YHWH rejects them for not guarding the ways of YHWH and for the manner by which they delivered rulings. Thus, while 2:1 began with a call to the priests to reconsider their actions, the subunit closes with YHWH's pronouncement that they will now be punished. The abhorrent actions of the priest are depicted as ongoing in 2:8-9, leaving YHWH no choice but to institute the curse.

CONNECTIONS

Malachi 1:6–2:9 contains two major points of emphasis. First, the passage places a high emphasis on cultic purity by focusing on propriety of gifts. Second, though it takes up less space, one portion of the text (1:11-14) also emphasizes the universal aspect of worship.

It may seem at first glance that, according to the majority of this passage, it is not enough merely to offer sacrifices. Rather, the text insists that worshipers must also attend to the quality of the sacrifice they offer. The passage raises the question whether it is better to give what you can or to give your best. When one reads Malachi

1:6–2:9, one is struck by the powerful admonitions that demand giving one's best to YHWH. This attitude may strike some as quite harsh in comparison to Jesus' parable of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). Jesus admonishes those listening to follow the lead of the widow who gave a paltry sum, but who gave what she could. In reality, these two texts are not as far apart as one might think because of (1) the contextual confrontation and (2) the value of gifts to God that they both underscore. [Malachi and the Widow's Mite]

Given the nature of the rhetoric, it is likely that this group is comprised of those who are relatively well off in comparison to much of the worshipping community. They have animals in their flock, but they are selective in what they choose to give to YHWH. By contrast, the monetary value of what the widow in Jesus' parable offers constitutes far less than even the inferior sacrifices of those whose actions Malachi challenges. Nevertheless, her attitude shows a commitment to give that goes far beyond the economic value alone. It is doubtful Malachi would have challenged her gift any more than Jesus did. In fact, in Malachi's disputation YHWH announces to the priests that he would rather close the temple than allow the public degradation of inferior offerings there when those among the nations were bringing pure offerings (1:10–11). Both the parable and Malachi's disputation have more to say about the proper attitude of giving than about the gifts themselves. Parallels for modern communities of faith are not hard to find. God does not need our money; God wants us to give willingly. God does not care about the value of the gift; God looks at how the giver values the gift.

Malachi and the Widow's Mite



An interesting hermeneutical comparison develops if one looks at Mal 1:6–2:9 alongside the parable of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). First, one should recognize that Mal 1:6–2:9 directs its message to the priests, not the population at large. The addressee of the parable, however, makes the point of the parable a more general didactic thrust toward all worshipers. One of the major tasks of the priests in the second temple period is to serve as gatekeepers. They are the ones who, guided by the Torah, determine what constitutes proper and improper sacrifice. Malachi's disputation challenges the priests because they, at least in Malachi's opinion, systematically ignore the cultic requirements they are commissioned to protect. Yet Jesus' parable is told immediately after Jesus confronts the arrogance and hypocrisy of the scribes (Mark 12:38–40; Luke 20:45–47). In this sense, then, Malachi challenges the leaders directly for letting certain people slide by, while Jesus exhorts the people on how to give, after telling them to ignore what their leaders do.

Second, to be sure, the Malachi passage assumes an implicit critique of those bringing sacrifices, but this critique explicitly challenges the practices of those who are treating their obligations to YHWH as inferior to their other financial obligations. What galls the prophet is that the priests are letting the worshipers get away with it. Those whom the prophet confronts indirectly are those who are bringing inferior animals to YHWH, but who would never dream of bringing this inferior quality to the magistrates (1:8). For this group, it is not a question of resources but a question of attitude. The priests and the prophet know full well that the people about whom the prophet speaks have the means to provide quality sacrifice, and, just as important, they have made a spectacle of saying they will do so (1:14). In Malachi, the prophet implicitly challenges the hypocrisy of this group, not their ability to give. The prophet challenges the priests for not confronting this group. Jesus' parable explicitly challenges the hypocrisy of the scribes by its placement while extolling the virtues of valuing what one gives to God.

The universality of the worship of YHWH referenced in Malachi 1:11–14 represents a second aspect of 1:6–2:9 that deserves attention because it is rather unusual in the Old Testament and in the Book of the Twelve. Clearly, an eschatological purpose fits with early Christian interpretive moves to see the Old Testament as predictive of Christ's coming, but the grammar and the form of the

Malachi 1:11–14 and the Didache



The Didache (an early Christian document dated to the late first or early second century) offers an example of this type of superimposition of Christian symbols onto Old Testament texts in the way in which it draws on Mal 1:11–14 for proof-texting the need for the Eucharist:

Assemble on the Lord's day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. *Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until he has been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice.* For this is the offering of which the Lord has said, *"Everywhere and always bring me a sacrifice that is undefiled, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is the wonder of nations."* (Didache 14)

The first italicized portion draws on Matt 5:23–24 (though the context is about sacrifice, not the Lord's Supper) while the second italicized portion draws on Mal 1:11, 14.

disputation rely more on actual confrontation of existing realities, so the more natural reading suggests the original audience would have assumed that this challenge referred to the worship of YHWH in other regions than Judah. In other words, Christian theologians and apologists have tended to appropriate this and other prophetic texts to express continuity with the God of the Old Testament, but in so doing they were not averse to reading meanings into texts that were not originally present and that are not consistent with the message of the prophetic text as such. [Malachi 1:11–14 and the Didache] To read Malachi 1:11–14 as a promise to the church misses its confrontational tone and the contextual message that constitutes a stinging rebuke of religious leaders whose commitment to their task the prophet questions because of their behavior. The references to those worshipping among the nations are not made as a promise of the expansion of YHWH worshipers, but as part

of the rhetoric of confrontation to priests in Jerusalem who think they are in control. To interpret this passage for believers today, one should not lose sight of this context. At its core, this passage challenges religious leaders who use religious power to benefit themselves and who have replaced the God whom they should be serving with their own agendas.

NOTES

1. This phrase is one of a number of recurring phrases between Zech 8 and Mal 1. See James D. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors of the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 53–56; and *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 218; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1993) 197–200.

2. See Karl Elliger, *Die Propheten: Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania, Haggai, Sacharja, Maleachi* (ATD 25; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950) 187–88. Elliger treats 1:11–14 as a series of additions by later readers. Elliger argues that the tolerance presumed in 1:11–14 would be too big a stretch for the underlying material from the prophet Malachi whose attitude toward the cult is far more exclusive. It would make no sense for the prophet to praise the cultural adaptations of sacrifice outside the temple while at the same time calling for stricter observance of sacrifice inside the temple. He argues that vv. 11–13 enter together while the curse in v. 14 represents a second addition to the context because it is not specifically directed against the priests but against the laity. Elliger also considers 2:2 an addition, probably by the same author as 1:11–13, as well as 2:7, which he argues interrupts the forward movement of the passage.

3. For instance, Jacob Wöhrle assigns several noncontiguous phrases in 1:6–11 to at least three different redactors (*Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* [BZAW 389; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008] 222–33, 262). Wöhrle assigns “priests” in 1:6, 1:7a, 10a, and the phrase “it is polluted” from 1:12 to the redaction that critiques the cult—along with 2:2–9, 11–13; 3:3a, 4. He assigns 1:9a to his “grace layer” (the only passage in Malachi so designated) and he sees 1:7b and 1:11a as isolated additions not clearly identified with a redactional agenda. Less drastic decisions are made by Erich Bosshard and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, who treat only 1:14a as a later adaptation from the hand of the final redactor who also added 1:1; 2:10–12; and 3:22–24 (“Maleachi im Zwölfprophetenbuch,” *BN* 52 [1990]: 27–46). Their rationale is that 1:14a concerns all Israel rather than just the priests (45). This material, in their opinion, attempts to restructure the first two layers of Malachi.

4. David L. Petersen implies that this changed perspective is deliberately distinct from the curses in Deuteronomy, which are all formulated as potential future events. By contrast, Mal 2:2b “reports that the curses are now in force” (*Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995] 188).

5. In the case of both Bosshard and Kratz, for example, they even treat the foundational layer as the product of an editor who is working with a wider literary horizon than the book of Malachi alone. They argue that this wider horizon includes at least Zech 1–8 (Bosshard and Kratz, “Maleachi im Zwölfprophetenbuch,” 32).

6. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 189.

7. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 332–34.

8. Num 25:12–13 has also been suggested as a possible source for understanding reference to the covenant of Levi, specifically in the works of Meyers, Glazier-McDonald, and O’Brien. Meyers and Glazier-McDonald make the case for the dependence of Malachi on Num 25:12–13 (Eric M. Meyers, “Priestly Language in the Book of Malachi,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 [1986]: 225–37; Beth Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* [SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987] 120–22), while O’Brien demonstrates the extent to which Malachi deviates from both Deut 33:19–22 and from Num 25:12–13, the latter being a text largely recognized as a Priestly text (*Priest and Levite in Malachi* [SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 101–107). From the former, Malachi highlights the theme of faithfulness and defines the priesthood as involving teaching and sacrifice, while from the latter Malachi borrows the idea that Levi has been granted perpetual priesthood. In her vision, Malachi remains relatively neutral regarding the political processes of the debates between the sons of Aaron and the sons of Levi (*Priest and Levite in Malachi*, 143–45). Nevertheless, O’Brien’s attempt

to downplay Malachi as taking sides in the struggle contrasts markedly with both the tenor and the rhetoric of the book. In Malachi, the issue of how one acts as a priest is front and center, and while Malachi adapts the Deuteronomy source, Malachi's inclinations clearly rest more with the Deuteronomic model of priesthood that includes the Levites than it does with the Priestly tradition and its demotion of Levites.

INFIDELITY OF JUDAH

Malachi 2:10-16

COMMENTARY

A new disputation begins in 2:10, the third one in Malachi. This one confronts the people as a whole rather than the priests, though many of the same issues are treated. Malachi 2:10 draws on the language of Deuteronomy 32:6, with its reference to God as father and creator, and it introduces the theme of Malachi 2:10-16. This passage has generated two schools of thought with respect to its original meaning. One group treats the passage as being about a man's divorce from a Judean woman and subsequent marriage to a foreigner.¹ The second group understands the confrontational language about divorce as an extended metaphor concerning idolatry.² Both sides are well attested in scholarly literature of recent decades, but the first group is more prominent in the history of reception. The second group, which understands the bulk of this passage as condemning idolatry, ultimately makes better sense of the text as it stands, in spite of the fact that some of its proponents have made their case by unnecessarily emending the MT. [\[Translation of Malachi 2:11\]](#)

Much rests on how one interprets the unique phrase “daughter of the foreign god” (*bat-ʾēl nêkār*) in Malachi 2:11: “for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of YHWH, which he loves, and *married the daughter of a foreign god*” (*bāal bat-ʾēl nêkār*). Those interpreting this passage as a diatribe against divorce understand the phrase as an idiomatic expression for marrying a foreign woman. “Judah’s” faithlessness, therefore, is interpreted in this approach as marrying outsiders, or non-Judeans. However, the parallel masculine expression “son of God” does not typically refer to humans, but to members of the heavenly council (e.g., Job 1–2). Moreover, even the word “daughter” can be used to refer to consorts of a deity or can personify foreign cities (e.g., Jer 50:42). In this respect, then, the phrase would more consistently be interpreted as referring to the worship of some

Translation of Malachi 2:11

ΑΩ D. L. Petersen's treatment of 2:11 offers a case in point for unnecessarily emending the text. The relevant clause in 2:11 can be compared with the NRSV:

NRSV: Judah has been faithless (*bgdh*), and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, *which* he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. David L. Petersen: Judah has acted faithlessly (*bgd*). An abomination has been performed in Israel, in Jerusalem. Judah has profaned the very holiness of YHWH. He loves *Asherah*; he has married the daughter of a foreign god.

Petersen suggests that a letter fell away (due to haplography) from the relative pronoun, so that what was originally *šrh* ("Asherah") became *šr* ("which"). The original *šrh* would have been the direct object of the verb "love" whose subject, Petersen believes, is Judah rather than YHWH. As a result, he offers a different translation that condemns the worship of Asherah rather than the temple. Petersen's interpretation points in the right

direction, but, unfortunately, no manuscript evidence supports this reading (or the omission of the *h* on *bgdh* in the first clause). The general intuition about the direction of the passage as one dealing with ritual fidelity is, nevertheless, supportable on the basis of MT without having to presuppose emendation and without bringing Asherah into the text. The same language can be found in Zeph 3:4, which condemns Jerusalem's priests for "profaning the sanctuary" and calls her prophets men of faithlessness (*bgdwt*), suggesting that the entire verse has the past (as well as the present) still in view. This language also appears as part of the condemnation of Judah in Jer 3:7, 10, which refers to Judah as the faithless (*bgwdh*) sister of Israel. The context of Jer 3:7-10 also utilizes the metaphor of divorce when speaking of Israel and Judah's idolatry (see Jer 3:1). In short, the accusations against Judah in Hosea, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah form the background of these verses in much the same way that the priestly blessing formed the background of the previous unit (see Mal 1:6).

David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 194.

foreign deity, worship that was condemned by prophets in the late preexilic period, such as the queen of heaven in Jeremiah (7:18; 44:17, 18, 19, 25) or Tammuz in Ezekiel (8:14).³ [Queen of Heaven and Tammuz] The use of the verb *bā'al* for "marry" also evokes these connotations since Baal worship was one of the things most frequently condemned in that time.

Malachi 2:10-16 likely reflects such traditions so that the history of Judah's infidelity to YHWH certainly represents an important factor of Malachi's challenge to the current practices. Historically, this worship of other deities took on various forms (including Asherah, the queen of heaven, and Tammuz), but the phrase "daughter of a foreign god" does not need to identify the deity because the phrase summarizes and condemns the action itself.

The language in 2:12 functions as the verdict for the accusations of 2:10-11. Anyone from Jacob (= Judah here) worshiping other deities will be cut off from the covenant community. The second half of this verse is quite difficult to translate. Suggestions by Petersen and Beth Glazier-McDonald have understood sexual innuendo in the verse. This path requires emendation of the

Queen of Heaven and Tammuz



Several texts indicate that syncretistic practices in the late seventh and early sixth centuries in Judah involved the worship of goddesses alongside YHWH. Jer 7:16-20 and 44:15-25 mention the “queen of heaven” as an object of worship, apparently particularly for some women in Judah (7:16-20) and later in Egypt (44:15-25). This deity is described in a way that suggests characteristics of both Astarte (a west Semitic goddess) and Ishtar (a Mesopotamian goddess). Worship of the deity included the use of cakes (perhaps made in her image using molds).

Jeremiah 7:16-18 levels the charge that Judah and Jerusalem have worshiped the queen of heaven:

¹⁶As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. ¹⁷Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes

for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. (NRSV)

The remaining verses in Jeremiah (44:17, 18, 19, 25) deal with the remnant that went to Egypt and continued worshipping this Queen of Heaven there.

In Ezekiel (8:14) also, one finds evidence of the blending of the worship of YHWH with the worship of a Mesopotamian god, specifically Tammuz. Tammuz is likely the Hebrew spelling of Dumuzi, the god consigned to the underworld in place of his lover, the goddess Inana. Ezek 8:14 is particularly instructive for Mal 2:11 because the women weeping for Tammuz do so by the north gate of the temple compound, and because the next verses describe the men of the house of Judah prostrating themselves to worship the sun (or some Astral deity), with the temple at their backs (8:16-17). In short, the picture in Jeremiah and Ezekiel depicts the temple compound itself as a place where syncretism flourished in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE.

pointing but not necessarily the consonantal text, and it is not attested in the early versions. [Translating Malachi 2:12]

O’Brien opens the door for a solution when she makes a strong syntactical case that takes seriously the verb *krt* followed by the *lamed* preposition. Most translations mistakenly treat the preposition as the sign of the direct object. In other instances where this combination occurs, however, the preposition functions syntactically to mark the indirect object, specifically indicating “the person to whose detriment others will be cut off (1 Kgs 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kgs 9:8; 1 Sam 2:33).”⁴ The implications for English translations of Malachi 2:12 mean that the English prepositions used to express this relationship can include for, of, with, and from. O’Brien’s observation, though, means that “the one doing this” will cut off the one waking, responding, and bringing an offering. Rather than strictly juridical terms, however, these terms should be heard in a cultic context. The issue at stake concerns purity of religious expression toward YHWH. Malachi 2:12 assumes from the context that Judah should have been faithful to his spouse (YHWH) but instead has been unfaithful. The characters mentioned in the indictment in 2:12 are inclusive (Judah, Jerusalem, Israel), while the real distinctions are between those who worship only YHWH and those who seek to worship other deities as well as YHWH.

Translating Malachi 2:12

Ω Note the various ways the verse can be translated:

NRSV: May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob anyone who does this—*any to witness or answer*, or to bring an offering to the LORD of hosts.

Petersen: May YHWH cut off anyone from the tents of Jacob who does such a thing—*involving nakedness and improper cohabitation*; anyone who presents an offering to YHWH of Hosts.

Suggestion based on O'Brien's observation: For the one who does such a thing, may YHWH cut off from the tents of Jacob anyone awaking, responding, and making an offering to YHWH Sebaoth.

The suggestion that the text has in view sexual innuendo is plausible, but it assumes that fertility worship is the primary focus. Since D. L. Petersen emended the text in 2:11 to include Asherah, his reading makes sense, but lacking additional evidence, emending the text to include a specific reference to Asherah does not appear to be warranted. More likely, all three terms should be translated as participles, as they are pointed in the MT: the one awaking (*ʿēr*), and responding (*w^eōneh*), and

drawing near (with) an offering (*ʾumagīš minḥāh*). This language makes sense if one assumes that the issue at stake refers to people (“the one doing this”) worshiping other deities (2:11) while still wanting to worship in the temple.

Other scholars have seen the participles as legal terms: the one testifying and the one responding. The strength of their case lies in the supposed juridical background of the cultic lawsuit (*rib*), in which reference to a hostile witness and a defense attorney would make sense. The problem with this interpretation is that it requires textual emendation, from *ʿēr* (the one waking) to *ʿēd* (a witness). To be sure, this emendation involves two easily confused Hebrew letters, *dalet* and *resh*, and may even find some support in some Septuagint traditions. Basically, this approach treats 2:12 as a curse denying legal help to the accused. Nevertheless, this approach has difficulty explaining how these legal terms would function in relationship to the cultic act (the one bringing an offering to YHWH) that is also mentioned in conjunction with the other two terms.

Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 69–71; David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 194.

Relief of Malachi and Balaam



Bonanno Pisano (fl. 1174–1186). *The Prophets Malachi and Balaam*. Bronze relief on the main portal of the Duomo of Monreale. Romanesque, c. 1186. (Credit: Vanni/Art Resource, NY)

The extended metaphor of Hosea 2 lies in the background of this confrontation, where God confronts the land personified as the wife—though it has been adapted in Malachi to confront Judah rather than the land personified. The gender of the unfaithful spouse has been reversed in Malachi 2:11–13. Now, Judah is the husband who cheated on his spouse (YHWH) by worshiping another deity (“daughter of a foreign god”). Sadly, the Book of the Twelve essentially begins and ends with prophetic condemnation of the people’s inability to remain faithful to YHWH using marriage metaphors.

The accusations continue in 2:13 where the image depicts someone tearfully pleading at YHWH’s altar to accept the offering that person has brought. YHWH, however, rejects the offering because the one bringing it has

been cut off for worshipping other gods. This image coincides well with the previous verse that announces the removal of those practicing syncretistic offerings. Moreover, 2:13 also draws from earlier texts in the Book of the Twelve. Only Malachi 2:13 and Joel 2:17 combine the language of weeping and altar. They use different forms (Joel uses a verbal form; Mal 2:13 uses a noun), but the variation in form also reflects a different attitude toward the action. In Joel 2:17, the priests are commanded to weep between the altar and the vestibule and intercede for the people in hopes that YHWH will hear the prayer and perhaps have pity on the people. In Malachi 2:13, the action of weeping over the altar presumes repeated attempts at manipulating YHWH, but this action “no longer” causes YHWH to accept the offering. The combination of the command to weep and the statement that it is no longer effective leaves the reader of the Book of the Twelve to fill in the gaps, but this reader is not the only one who has questions. The very next verse articulates the question for the one bringing the sacrifice.

Malachi 2:14 poses the question of the ineffectiveness of the sacrificial offerings: “Why does YHWH not respond to the show of remorse?” It is at this point where interpretative options diverge. Those who interpret the passage as a reference to marital discord typically conceive of a situation where a new, presumably foreign wife has been replaced a Judean wife. By contrast, those who see the marital status as a metaphor for fidelity to YHWH see the language of infidelity as referring to the relationship between Judah and YHWH. The unusual element in this metaphor (especially when comparing Hosea 2 and Jeremiah 1–3) is that Judah is masculine, meaning that YHWH plays the role of the female partner here. Nevertheless, the phrase “wife of your youth” echoes the “husband of her youth” in Joel 1:8, which in turn depends on Hosea 2 (see discussion of Joel 1:8).

The first part of Malachi 2:15 is notoriously difficult to translate because MT needs something for it to make sense. [Translating Malachi 2:15] Syntax aside, the meaning of “the remnant of his spirit” and “one” complicates any translation. The phrase “remnant of his spirit” receives many interpretative translations because it is such an unusual phrase. The word “remnant” has the same form in both the absolute and construct forms, but MT connects it with the following words, thus likely understanding it as the construct form. Three possible interpretations have been suggested for understanding the identity of the third masculine singular suffix related

Translating Malachi 2:15

ΑΩ A brief look at several translations confirms the ambiguity:

NRSV: Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his.

NAS: But not one has done *so* who has a remnant of the Spirit.

NIV: Has not *the LORD* made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his.

ESV: Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union?

Recent commentators also deviate from one another. D. L. Petersen inserts a 1cp pronoun: "Has not (the) One made (us), his vigorous remnant?" Petersen understands God as the antecedent for the word "one." Similarly, A. E. Hill translates, "surely [The] One made [everything]? Even a residue of spirit belongs to him." By contrast, P. Verhoef (who treats the divorce motifs literally throughout) sees the text as corrupt and translates it loosely to read, "No one with the residue of spirit would act that way."

David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 194; Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 221; and Pieter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 262.

to spirit in this verse: the Spirit of God (perhaps alluding to Gen 1), the breath of life (alluding to Gen 2), or the idea of spirit as temperament.⁵ Interpreting the identity of the "one" also has yielded various interpretive suggestions: (1) if God is the subject of the verb, then the one can be interpreted as "one flesh"; (2) the one has been interpreted as Abraham; (3) the word *lōʾ* (no, not) goes with the word "one" rather than the verb "he made" thus signifying "no one" as the subject; and (4) several translations (NRSV, NIV) repoint the

vowels and add a *waw* conjunction in order to treat the word remnant (*šēʾār*) as an uncommon word for flesh (*šēʾēr*).

It is better to proceed cautiously with the text since two options can explain the MT without resorting to emendation. Sense can be made of MT if one assumes that the "one" refers to the woman ("And did he not make *her* one and the remnant of his spirit?") or to the woman and the man together ("And did he not make *them* one and the remnant of his spirit?"). The first interpretation requires only that one interpret the masculine form of the number "one" as a reference to the wife. Hebrew numbers are notoriously inconsistent with respect to gender, so a masculine form referring to a feminine entity would be unusual but not unattested (see Ezek 1:16). The second, and more likely, interpretation refers to the husband and wife who become one as in Genesis 2:21-24. This option requires no grammatical irregularities since the word "one" in "one flesh" (2:24) uses the masculine singular form to refer to the pair.

For those interpreting the passage metaphorically, Malachi 2:15 offers the pedagogical crux of the metaphor, while those who interpret the passage literally point to this verse as the clearest evidence that the passage concerns divorce and not idolatry. The second masculine singular reference means that Judah continues as the personified addressee. This accusation, then, makes it hard to

understand as a literal reference since it is hard to believe that all of Judah would be divorcing the wives of their youth. If the accusatory language were directed against a certain group, as well as the punishment, the literal interpretation would make more sense. By personifying Judah, however, as well as assuming that the entire country is at fault, the accusation casts a wide net. While marrying foreign wives is an issue in Ezra/Nehemiah, those texts more clearly delineate certain groups within the country, not the entire population, as the major culprits (see especially Ezra 10). The lack of such specificity makes the personification of Judah more suitable for a charge of idolatry than for a charge of exogamy.

The two avenues of interpretation manifest different takes on Malachi 2:16 as well as 2:15. Those who understand the contextual metaphors of divorce as a condemnation of idolatry merely understand this verse as an admonition to remain faithful to one's worship of YHWH. The literal interpretation treats this verse as a simple proscription against divorce. Some even see it as a kind of new law since nothing in the legal codes of the Pentateuch explicitly prohibits divorce. [Divorce in the Pentateuch] In comparison to the Pentateuchal texts, Malachi 2:16 condemns divorce itself. It implies that YHWH refuses to accept offerings of the man who initiated divorce. In this respect, Malachi 2:13-16 would be a step further along the continuum of biblical sayings concerning divorce. Legal texts are vague concerning when divorce is allowed. In Matthew, Jesus offers only one reason for divorce—infidelity (Matt 5:31-32)—while Mark offers an even stronger condemnation but assumes either the man or the woman can initiate divorce, even though it is wrong (Mark 10:2-10). Malachi 2:16 (when interpreted literally) forms the linchpin between divorce as a male prerogative and New Testament prohibitions.

Divorce in the Pentateuch



While there are passages regulating divorce in the Pentateuch, these texts typically only make provisions for the wife and assume that only the husband can initiate divorce. For example, Lev 21:13-14 prohibits priests from marrying divorced women (and prostitutes). Deut 21:14 represents the classic textual example of ancient Israelite divorce wherein a man can divorce a woman, but no thought is given to the woman initiating divorce. Deut 24:1-5 makes it even clearer that the initiative and the power to divorce lie with the husband, not the wife. Num 30:9-10 (MT vv. 10-11) allows divorced women to make vows on their own without male approval (while the same passage goes on to claim that married women need the approval of their husbands).

CONNECTIONS

Several possibilities for reflection present themselves with respect to Malachi 2:10-16. At least two should be mentioned here: the theo-

logical implications of divorce, fidelity, and/or infidelity as a metaphor for one's relationship with God, and the canonical awareness of the themes of Malachi.

Divorce and One's Relationship to God. First, no matter whether one interprets divorce figuratively or literally in this passage, the rhetorical discussion provides both a theological and an ethical grounding for the problem, even though it presumes a different social situation. The history of interpreting 2:10-16 has shown an emphatic use of this passage to condemn divorce, but the underlying theological rationale has not always figured as prominently. The rationale has to do with the covenantal nature of the relationship (2:10, 14), the infidelity of the male partner (2:11, 14, 16), and the way in which it profanes the temple (2:11, 13). If this passage relates to literal divorce, it places a high value indeed on the promise implicit in the union between marital partners. Terms such as "abomination" and "profane" have cultic connotations and implications. To break faith with a spouse implies breaking faith with YHWH because the commitment between partners in Malachi 2:10-16 involves the whole person: a sense of intimacy that cannot easily be recreated, the stability of family life, the economic livelihood of spouse and children, and a core value of integrity. If one is unwilling to maintain the promise to a spouse, it is hard to believe any promise would be sacred for that person. It is for this reason that 2:13 speaks of YHWH's unwillingness to accept outward signs of repentance from the unfaithful spouse.

While Malachi 2:10-16 presumes divorce is anathema to YHWH, history has shown how difficult it can be for some to remain in marriages that are destructive to one or both of the partners. All religious communities have to come to grips with realities of divorce, broken homes, and broken promises. Individual cases need to be considered differently. Ministering to those affected by divorce (as well as those causing it) should take precedence over blanket denunciations.

In a society like ours, however, we often speak too flippantly of broken marriages using offensive terms like trophy wives or euphemisms like growing apart to denote the breakup of a relationship that was intended to be permanent. This flippancy points to a deeper problem. It is not clear that the church's ability to perpetuate the sacred nature of a marital promise has kept pace with the broader culture's message that marital fidelity represents a quaint, archaic expectation of a bygone age. Marital infidelity is not a new

problem, as shown by Malachi and other biblical stories, but the erosion of a sense of sacred promise threatens to exacerbate the problem in our day beyond measure. This has practical and spiritual implications. Practically, it means church leaders need to do a better job of speaking about promises, especially one that has such significant consequences as marriage. Dealing with the issue should, of course, be a central focus of premarital counseling, but it goes deeper than that. Finding ways to reconnect the congregation, as well as individual members, with the sacred nature of covenant in general should be explored. For this reason, one should not ignore a third theological focus raised by 2:10-16: how one speaks about one's deeper spiritual relationships.

The reuse of images from Hosea in Malachi 2:10-16 evokes the images of syncretism and idolatry with which the Book of the Twelve began, and this accusation has implications for the reader. While the history of interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16 shows that syncretism and idolatry may not be the only interpretive avenue, it is nevertheless a key issue. It is Judah's infidelity that profanes the temple because it throws into question Judah's ability to recognize and to maintain its own covenant loyalty to YHWH. The question of the land's ability to recognize "the husband of her youth" played a foundational role in the accusations against both the southern and northern kingdoms in the Book of the Twelve, and this topic was the central focus of Hosea 2. Hosea 2 explored this metaphor by personifying the land as the female spouse whose infidelity made her both a prostitute and an adulteress. This unfaithful spouse went from lover to lover seeking a better financial return for her assets. Hosea 2 presented YHWH as the wounded male spouse who, in spite of his wife's infidelity, was willing to take her back if and when she ceased her illicit behavior. By contrast, Malachi 2:10-16 portrays the relationship between the unfaithful husband Judah and YHWH, with YHWH as the aggrieved *female* spouse. Here, Petersen's explications of the imagery of the fertility goddess become particularly illustrative. These texts, especially when taken together, underscore the intimate, covenantal relationship between YHWH and YHWH's people. The covenant implies a monogamous relationship, but that relationship has been broken by the wanton infidelity of one spouse. In both extended metaphors, the unfaithful spouse correlates with the people who have broken promises to remain faithful to YHWH.

Malachi and the Canon. When one combines these images as part of a reading strategy that is aware of the Book of the Twelve as a corpus in its own right, and one that displays an unmistakable chronological unfolding, then the theological implications of this extended metaphor become clearer. The prophetic compendium that is the Book of the Twelve essentially begins and ends with accusations that the people of God as a whole have been, and continue to be, unfaithful in maintaining their covenant responsibilities. Hosea's message was addressed to the people of God in the eighth century and Malachi's message to the people of the fifth century, but the people as a whole have essentially not changed. Their infidelity brought punishment time and again, and the punishment brought a change of heart that did not last. The prophets challenged the people to change their ways, and they admonished the people to repent before YHWH, but after 300 years, the prophetic messenger of the Persian period is still confronting the people with the same images used by the eighth-century prophet Hosea: covenant infidelity and idolatry.

The covenant is a two-way street. YHWH has remained faithful, but the people and their leaders continue to turn their backs on the God with whom they have been linked. This long view of history is presumed in Malachi 2:10-16. This perspective can be seen in the terms used for God's people (Judah, Israel, Jerusalem) and in the marital metaphor of 2:10-16. But the message of this text does not say the story is over.

Rather, the passage challenges the unfaithful to change. To be sure, this confrontation involves the rejection of the people's offerings (2:13), implying that YHWH sees through the insincerity of ritual mourning precisely because YHWH has seen it all before: "You ask, why he does not (accept the offerings)? Because YHWH was a witness between you and the wife of your youth . . ." (2:14). The admonitions of the prophet demand a change of behavior beyond outward acts of penance.

In this sense, though, YHWH's revulsion at divorce takes on experiential significance as well because it also signifies a limitation of the actions of YHWH. YHWH has reached the end of divine patience with the infidelity of the people, but YHWH still cannot initiate divorce against this people: "Do not be faithless to the wife of your youth because I hate divorce and covering one's garment with violence" (2:15-16).

As with Hosea 2, the text challenges the people to change their behavior toward YHWH, but it does not presume that YHWH has given up on the relationship. In a real sense, the cycle of infidelity represents one of the common themes uniting the Pentateuch and the Prophets. The opening commands of the Decalogue demand exclusionary focus on YHWH and speak of YHWH as a jealous God (Exod 20:3-5), and the command against idolatry is subsequently the first command Israel breaks in the narrative (see Exod 32). Admonitions against turning from YHWH to idols form a central motif at the end of the Pentateuch (see, for example, Deut 30:16-18). Israel's flirtation with the worship of Baal and other deities represents a major thematic focus of the narratives in the land as well as an explicit rationale for the destruction of Israel (2 Kgs 17:7-18) and Judah (2 Kgs 17:19-20). [2 Kings 17:7-20] The consistency with which YHWH keeps his covenant promises and YHWH's people break theirs can hardly be overestimated as a major recurring theological statement of Genesis through Kings. In this respect, the role of Malachi 2:10-16 within the thematic progression of Malachi as a whole needs further reflection.

2 Kings 17:7-20



At the point where the book of Kings recounts Israel's punishment by the Assyrians, 2 Kgs 17:7-20 offers a theological assessment of the reasons for Israel's judgment and a warning to Jerusalem.

⁷This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods ⁸and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced. ⁹The people of Israel secretly did things that were not right against the LORD their God. They built for themselves high places at all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city; ¹⁰they set up for themselves pillars and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree; ¹¹there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. They did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger; ¹²they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." ¹³Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴They would not listen but were stubborn, as

their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false; they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do as they did. ¹⁶They rejected all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. ¹⁷They made their sons and their daughters pass through fire; they used divination and augury; and they sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ¹⁸Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah alone. ¹⁹Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced. ²⁰The LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel; he punished them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had banished them from his presence.

The passage condemns idolatry and the worship of other gods. It explicates those actions as a rejection of the covenant by Israel and Judah. This repeated rejection finally provokes the wrath of YHWH against Israel and creates an implicit warning for Judah (17:18-19).

The thematic progression of the first three disputations in Malachi (1:2-5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10-16) bears an uncanny resemblance to some of the thematic foci of the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets, opening the way for understanding Malachi's role as the conclusion to the Latter Prophets (a function that becomes even more pronounced at the end of Malachi). Malachi 1:2-5 revolves around the theological issue of election using the names of the ancestors of Jacob and Esau whose stories constitute a major source of reflection for this theme in Genesis (see the discussion of Kaminsky in 1:2-5). Next, Malachi 1:6–2:9 focuses on the proper role of the priests in the cult, a theme that plays a central role in the structure of the Pentateuch from the end of Exodus through Deuteronomy. Finally, the theme of idolatry and syncretism lies at the heart of the accusations made against the people and leaders in the narratives of the Former Prophets because these are precisely the reasons presupposed as central to the entire narrative of Israel and Judah in the land. The Former Prophets begin with the need to expunge the nations from the promised land in order to create a place where YHWH can be worshiped without the influence of other religious systems. The narrative concludes by telling the story of the destruction of Samaria (2 Kgs 17) and Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25) as the result of the people and the leadership failing to understand the need to worship YHWH alone.

Admittedly, this thematic progression represents broad strokes, but it is all the more striking when one realizes that the last verses of Malachi invite the reader, even more concretely, to evaluate the role of the Torah and the Former and Latter Prophets (see discussion of Mal 4:4-5 [MT 3:22-23]). Such observations greatly increase the likelihood that the literary entity known as Malachi, the final form if not the entire compilation process, deliberately took account of its role as the conclusion to the prophetic canon. Whereas the first three disputations utilize these broad thematic connections to evoke texts about the past in order to confront those in the present, beginning with the fourth disputation (2:17–3:6) the concluding units of the book challenge those in the present to look to the coming day of YHWH—a future day of reckoning.

Modern readers who have a long history with a community of faith are used to hearing biblical stories in bite-sized chunks. We pull out individual episodes for reflection, or we memorize verses

that hit home with us. Malachi 2:10-16 (and its eschatological counterpart in 4:4-5) call us to stop and reflect in a different way. How does our story intersect with the big picture, or with the big themes of Israel's story? Is our community a faith-full community desiring to maintain a healthy commitment to God? Do we as individuals behave as though we can do what we want because God, and our community of faith, will take us back? Or do we take heed and be faithful? Periodically, we all need to take stock of who we are: as people of faith and people of the world; as individuals within communities and as communities filled with individuals. What is the state of our relationship with God? The extended relational metaphors of Malachi and Hosea allow these big questions to be considered.

NOTES

1. Recent examples of scholars treating Mal 2:10-16 as a diatribe against divorce and/or marrying foreign wives include Andrew Hill, *Malachi* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 228–29; Pieter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 269–70; and Elizabeth Achtemaier, *Nahum–Malachi* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox) 181.

2. Recent examples of scholars who have treated 2:10-16 as a passage dealing with cultic impurity include David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 193–206; and Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 66–73. Beth Glazier-McDonald argues that both must be incorporated (*Malachi*, 83–120). Glazier-McDonald may well be correct that the language assumes a social problem (divorce of Judean wives) that has cultic implications, but her assumptions regarding the pervasive nature of the problem of marriage to foreign women do not seem to fit the social context of the Persian period as now understood.

3. Glazier-McDonald notes that this logic falls short of absolute proof for two reasons (*Malachi*, 92–93): (1) because the plural form “sons of YHWH” is applied to the people of Israel without implying they are deities in texts like Deut 14:1; 32:19; Hos 1:1; Isa 1:2; and (2) “daughter” is antithetically opposed to father in 2:10, where it is clear YHWH is the father of all people of Judah. The plural form is not the same, however, as the singular, and the parallel to father primarily serves to heighten the sense of indignation at what Judah has done.

4. O'Brien, *Priests and Levites*, 71.

5. See Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 276. Verhoef overstates the idea of temperament as that of sound judgment.

THE COMING DAY OF YHWH

Malachi 2:17–4:6

COMMENTARY

The second half of Malachi shifts its primary focus from the confrontation of the priests and people of the current generation to an emphasis on the future, specifically the coming day of YHWH. Further, whereas the priests and the people had been the focus of the confrontation in the first half of Malachi, neither the priests nor the Levites play a prominent role beyond the first of the six units that comprise the remainder of the book (2:17–3:5; 3:6–12; 3:13–15; 3:16–18; 4:1–3 [MT 3:19–21]; 4:4–6 [MT 3:22–24]). Instead, various episodes referencing the day of YHWH take center stage and lead to the affirmation of a group (those fearing YHWH) who respond positively to the prophet's message. Disputation elements dominate the first three of these units only, while the last three relate differently to the preceding material and to one another.

Purification before the Day of YHWH, 2:17–3:5

Four lines of thought comprise the fourth disputation (2:17–3:5). Malachi 2:17 begins the unit by confronting the people with their uncritical and self-absorbed behavior. In response, 3:1–5 warns of the nearness of a two-stage day of judgment in which YHWH's messenger will come (3:1–2a) and first judge the Levites so that pure offerings can be brought on behalf of Judah and Jerusalem (3:2b–4). Then YHWH will appear to judge the wicked with finality (3:5). These subunits confront listeners and challenge them to act before the coming day of YHWH.

Malachi 2:17. The fourth disputation begins with an accusation that speaks of YHWH in the third person, though first person speech by YHWH dominates the remainder of the disputation. The subject matter of the accusation concerns two issues. First, the prophet's dis-

putation confronts the people regarding the trouble they have caused YHWH. The verb translated by the NRSV as “wearied” comes from a verb that means to “labor, grow tired.” As such, it does not imply impatience as much as it does fatigue.

Second, the nature of divine justice takes center stage when the prophet quotes the people. Malachi 2:17 contains two quotes from the people that illustrate an inability to understand the nature of justice. The first quote accuses the people of saying human actions do not matter to YHWH. In this prophetic polemic, the speakers claim divine approval of evil actions (“All who do evil are good in the sight of YHWH”). The second quote (“Where is the God of justice?”) can be interpreted in at least four ways. First, the second quote can be read as a complaint, much like the language of Psalms where a speaker challenges God to act (see Pss 22:1; 89:49). The context of the disputation, however, argues against this interpretation. Second, at least one commentator sees the language as an allusion to the account of Elisha’s taking up the mantle of Elijah when Elisha summons YHWH to part the waters of the Jordan, but the reason for the allusion is not entirely clear.¹ Third, given the disputational nature of 2:17–3:5, the question can be read as the arrogant claim of one who is unafraid of divine recompense. Fourth, one can read this verse as the reprisal of a motif that already appeared in the Book of the Twelve. The delay of punishment of the wicked raises questions from YHWH’s enemies questioning YHWH’s ability to bless (Joel 2:17), and the ongoing pattern of rebellion that YHWH’s own people have exhibited (see Amos 5:14–15; Mic 6:9–16; Hab 1:2–4) raises questions about YHWH’s willingness to punish the guilty. Granted, these passages are not inherently tied to one another, but they do point to an important element to bear in mind with the last units of Malachi. Namely, these units show increasing signs that Malachi was compiled with other texts in mind that point to a much bigger story as the backdrop against which the book wants to be heard.

Malachi 3:1–2a. In Malachi 3:1, one finds the beginning of the shift toward a focus on the future as the prophet introduces the messenger who foreshadows the day of YHWH. This future orientation plays a prominent role in the remainder of Malachi. At least three issues need to be clarified while interpreting this verse in context: the identity of the messenger, the role of the Lord who comes to the temple (*ʾādôn* not YHWH), and the meaning of the

covenant in whom the people delight. These three issues are interrelated: identification of the messenger, the “Lord,” and the covenant.

Who is the messenger? This question has generated claims that this messenger is a priestly, messianic, eschatological, or prophetic figure. [Identity of the Messenger] The role of the messenger is a prophetic figure associated with the making of a covenant in noncanonical contexts.

Who is the Lord (ʿādôn)? At least three explanations have been suggested to identify the Lord in this text: an earthly person of substance, a heavenly messenger, or YHWH himself. [Identifying the Lord (ʿādôn)] The most likely identity here is YHWH.

What is the covenant here? The content of the covenant mentioned here has generated at least three suggestions: the Sinai Covenant, the covenant community itself, and the New Covenant. [The Content of the Covenant] The assumption that the breaking of the covenant stipulations blends with accusations against the covenant community makes the best sense of the context.

In Malachi 3:2a, two parallel rhetorical questions quickly darken the tenor of this passage. After speaking about the messenger of the covenant who is sought and desired, 3:2 confronts the reader with the realization that expectations for this messenger are misplaced. Rather, the day on which this messenger comes will bring judgment in the form of fire and cleansing. The two rhetorical questions both assume a single answer: no one will escape when the messenger comes. The phrase “day of his coming” is unique, but there are good reasons for assuming that it refers to the day of YHWH as a day of judgment against YHWH’s own people. Chief among these reasons is the use made of Malachi 3:2a by Joel 2:11.² The context presumes that this judgment purifies the Levites (3:3) and opens the way for proper sacrifice (3:4).

Malachi 3:2b–5. Quite a number of commentators have treated portions of 3:2–4 as a secondary expansion to the original disputa-

Identity of the Messenger

ΑΩ The interpretation of Mal 3:1 has been clouded by later reception (Jewish and Christian) that has tended to interpret this messenger as a messianic figure, but that is by no means the only way the reference can be understood, and it probably was not the original intention. Rather, as D. L. Petersen and J. O’Brien have shown, the messenger plays a significant role in canonical and non-canonical contexts where covenants come into play. P. Verhoeff believes, however, that the identity of the messenger is none other than YHWH himself, interpreting the figure as a surprising literary device in line with other texts wherein the messenger of YHWH turns out to be none other than YHWH himself as the narrative unfolds (Gen 16:7–14; 21:17–21; 22:1–18; Exod 3:2–22). Such a conflated reading of the three terms, however, appears rather forced. The narrative traditions to which Verhoeff points originated earlier, and their “surprise” transformation of the messenger has other explanations.

O’Brien and Petersen eschew these models and focus instead on the role of the messenger in covenant or treaty settings. This messenger will punish covenant violators and purify the priests. These are the tasks implied when 3:1 speaks of preparing the way for YHWH.

Julia M. O’Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 74; David L. Petersen, *Zachariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 209–10; Pieter Verhoeff, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 288–89.

Identifying the Lord (*ʾādôn*)



A. E. Hill looks at the question linguistically and contextually by focusing on three different ways that the word *ʾādôn* is used in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. First, the word can refer to an earthly lord in the sense of landowner or master, as it appears in Mal 1:6. The context does not suggest this meaning in Mal 3:1. Second, *ʾādôn* can be used as an epithet of respect for a heavenly messenger (Zech 1:9; 4:4, 5, 13). Third, the term can be used when addressing YHWH (4:14; 6:5), and this is the sense in which he understands the term in Mal 3:1. The messenger prepares the way for YHWH and initiates the day of YHWH. J. O'Brien comes to the same conclusion but recognizes that since the "messenger functions as the altar-ego of the sovereign," some ambiguity arises from the "grammatical fusion" of the three terms master, Lord, and messenger of the covenant in 3:1. For her, the covenant lawsuit (*rîb*)

framework shared between Micah 1 and Malachi helps illustrate this fusion. When speaking of the functions played by YHWH in the lawsuit, Mic 1:2 uses the terms Lord God, witness, and Lord (*ʾādônāy*) to refer to the deity who will arrive at the temple. D. L. Petersen, however, takes his clue from Exod 23:20 ("Behold, I send my messenger before you to guard your way") but believes that the postexilic idea of the prophet as messenger makes better sense than an anonymous angelic figure (2 Chr 36:15-16; see also Hag 1:13). He sees the subsequent connection of this messenger with Elijah in the epilogue to Mal (4:5-6) as a natural extension of this conceptualization.

Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 268; Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 75; David L. Petersen, *Zachariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 210.

The Content of the Covenant



P. Verhoeff sees the covenant as the Sinai covenant. D. L. Petersen, following A. S. van der Woude, believes the epithet refers to the covenant community, not just the content of the Sinai traditions. After noting how the blessings and curses associated with the Mosaic covenant in Deut 28 form the background of the fourth disputation in Malachi (2:17–3:5), A. E. Hill opts instead to interpret the covenant in 3:1 as an allusion to the new covenant concepts of Jer 31:29 and Ezek 18:3 in which an earlier covenant community's misbehavior no longer holds sway over a later generation. Hill even suggests that 3:1, read as a response to 2:17, may already raise the issue of corporate versus individual responsibility in YHWH's covenant stipulations. Such a change hardly seems warranted in the context. J. O'Brien appears to identify the covenant implicitly as

the Sinai covenant as she interprets the messenger's task as purifying the community *because* they have broken the covenant stipulations. In this manner, she picks up on elements from both Verhoeff and Petersen. This perspective also helps to explain how Mal 3:1 leads directly into 3:2a, wherein the text takes a more somber tone of judgment associated with the day of the LORD.

Pieter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 288–89; David L. Petersen, *Zachariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 211; Adam S. van der Woude, "Der Engel des Bundes: Bemerkungen zu Maleachi 3:1c und seinem Kontext," in *Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für H.W. Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Jörg Jeremias and Lothar Perlt; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981) 290–92; Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 269–70; Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 74–75.

tion/oracle. Petersen, for example, considers 3:2b–4 as an expansion that does not cohere with the original oracle (3:1-2a, 5).³ Others argue that the logic of the unit can be followed if one treats 3:2b–4 as a kind of excursus to the main issue.

The two similes used for judgment need explication. The refiner's fire is a metallurgical term, referring to the smelting process whereby impurities are removed from metal ore as it is heated. Fuller's soap is a less common image. The phrase implies cleansing by pounding cloth to get out dirt. In this respect the phrase parallels the imagery of refining metal, but it is not directly related to

the refining process. Some have noted, however, that the term is better understood as part of the metal-refining process.⁴ The term could be understood as an alkali material used in refining metal, either lye or potash, so that the ore would more quickly be separated from the dross when heated. The feminine word *bōrît* in Malachi 3:2 appears elsewhere only in Jeremiah 2:22, but the masculine term *bōr* appears in Isaiah 1:25 in the process of smelting. The metallurgical nuance in Malachi 3:2 extends the previous simile of the refiner's fire, but it would require knowledge that may or may not have been possessed by the prophet's audience. The precise meaning of the term may be ambiguous, but the reason for using the feminine term over the masculine can be understood as a simple word play on the Hebrew word for covenant from the previous verse. Malachi 3:1 refers to the messenger of the covenant (*bērît*) whom people anticipate with delight, while instead, 3:2 indicates the messenger will come to cleanse with lye (*bōrît*).

Malachi 3:3 identifies the object of the judgment as the descendants of Levi, which raises the question whether this disputation addresses the Levites rather than the people as a whole. (See [Levites] and [Priestly Conflict] in Malachi 2.) Such is not the case because 3:4–7 presumes judgment against the larger population: Malachi 3:4 mentions Judah and Jerusalem; 3:6 addresses the sons of Jacob; 3:7 speaks of their ancestors; and 3:5 singles out those who are breaking various legal proscriptions. Thus, the purification of the Levites represents the first step in the process of purifying the entire country. Until the Levites have been cleansed, the ability of the cult to function properly will remain compromised. The Levites will be cleansed (3:3) so that proper sacrifice can be offered (3:4). Only then will judgment take place (3:5) against those transgressing YHWH's commandments.

Who are the descendants of Levi in Malachi 3:3? This question remains one of the most vexing issues of the early and middle Second Temple period. During this period, fissures continue to develop in the ranks of the clergy. At times the lines can be drawn clearly between the sons of Aaron, whose primary duties involve the altar service, and the Levites whose role as secondary clerics differs markedly—not only from the role of the descendants of Aaron but also from the role of the Levites in Deuteronomy. More often, however, these lines blur. At some point, for example, the descendants of Aaron also begin tracing their lineage back to Levi,

making it difficult to distinguish between the two by their progenitors.⁵ Nevertheless, sometimes the Levites are more prominent, while at other times their role in the cult is reduced. This vacillation makes a clear reconstruction difficult. All in all, though, the trajectory of the fate of the Levites slowly moves downward relative to their role in performing sacrifice at the altar, but they generally have a leadership role at least among the secondary clerics.

Malachi's understanding of the Levites is difficult to place within this power struggle. On the one hand, Malachi's sense of how the priests are supposed to conduct their duties creates considerable conflict with those who are actually performing those duties. Hence, the combative nature of the rhetoric toward the priests suggests the speaker is not fully part of those priests actually performing duties at the altar. On the other hand, the knowledge of Pentateuchal tradition concerning priests can hardly be the work of an outsider. The perspective of Malachi, pointing to Levi as the ideal priest while never mentioning Aaron, suggests that the author of Malachi more likely falls among the Levites than among the altar priests. Malachi's critique of what others are doing at the altar makes sense as the product of one who knows what should be done yet is appalled at what those now in power are willing to do. They compromise with Persian political appointees and influential members of the community who do not take the covenant obligations seriously. Malachi's perspective probably reflects a time not far removed from a downturn in the fate of the Levites. Clearly, Malachi is unhappy with the role of the priests as currently performed. By Malachi 3:16, another group appears—those who fear YHWH—with a different understanding of righteousness. This group, with whom the author of Malachi undoubtedly identifies, seeks to discern the ways of YHWH through a book of remembrance.

Malachi 3:4 anticipates that the purification of the Levites leads to the presentation of offerings that will please YHWH as in the past. Two terms are used to designate the past. The “days of old” uses the Hebrew word *’olām*, a word that conveys the sense of perpetuity but can also refer to the distant future or the distant past. The phrase “former years” is less common, but the adjective in this phrase (*qadmōnî*; see also the noun *qedem*) has the basic meaning of east or former, which would not necessarily refer to the distant past. [When Are the Days of Old?] At any rate, Malachi 3:4 anticipates a

When Are the Days of Old?



An interesting question arises for the reader of the Book of the Twelve and the prophetic corpus when one asks whether these two terms (“former years” and “days of old”) represent mere synonyms or whether they represent two distinct periods. The Book of the Twelve begins in Hosea with the assumption that there was a time in the past when the relationship between YHWH and Israel functioned better than it did in the prophet’s time. Later portions of Amos (9:11) and Micah (5:1; 7:14, 20) refer to “days of old” in contexts that presume a time when the boundaries of

the Davidic monarchy were in place. By contrast, Isa 63:11 uses the phrase to refer to the period of the exodus. Other texts are less specific but nevertheless generally convey an idea of the distant, often idealized past. The reader of the Book of the Twelve might well interpret these two phrases together as a merism, with “the days of old” referring to a time in the idealized past and “the preceding years” as a reference to the previous generation that had repented and rebuilt the temple (see discussion of Zech 1:6).

return to proper sacrifice that connects the idealized past with the purifying judgment of the coming day of YHWH.

Following the description of the purification of the Levites and its consequences (3:3-4), the text lists a series of groups who will be the object of judgment (sorcerers, adulterers, those swearing falsely, and oppressors). These groups are comprised of persons violating various ethical and cultic proscriptions, all of which have ties to the major law codes in the Pentateuch. They represent concrete breaches of covenant stipulations (see 3:1).

The passage ends with a theological reason for punishing these groups. The final line of 3:5 (“They do not fear me”) describes the motive of those violating these norms, not an additional group. This rationale throws light onto the response to the prophetic disputations that begins in 3:16, where “those fearing YHWH” begin speaking with one another in a way that causes YHWH to respond favorably to them (see 3:16). The passage thus provides two different fates: judgment for those who do not fear (3:5) and recognition from YHWH for those who do (3:16-18).

Return to Me, 3:6-12

Malachi 3:6-12 uses the disputation genre to offer what is essentially a call to repentance that ends with a threefold promise. The unit begins (3:6-7) with statements concerning the consistency of both YHWH and the people (though, ironically, the people’s consistency has to do with their continually turning their back on YHWH). These statements lay the foundation for a call to repentance that the people seem incapable of understanding. The second phase of this disputation (3:8-9) challenges the current behavior of the people, accusing them of attempting to rob YHWH by not ful-

filling their covenant obligations. In the final section (3:10–12), YHWH offers a concrete charge to the people: test me by bringing the offering (3:10) and I will change the situation. This change takes the form of a threefold promise for the children of Jacob (3:6) to send rain (3:10b) and to remove the locust devouring the land (3:11) so that the nations will envy you and your land (3:12).

The nature of the fifth disputation, 3:6–12, needs some explanation. Some commentators treat this passage as more independent of its literary context than others. Petersen, for example, translates the opening word (*kî*) as “truly” and does not speak of a causal relationship between 3:1–5 and 3:6–12.⁶ By contrast, Beth Glazier-McDonald, along with the NRSV, translates the opening word as “for.” She says that 3:6–12 “flows directly out of the closing verse (3:5).”⁷ What follows here assumes that 3:6–12 is tied causally

Returning to YHWH in the Book of the Twelve



Repentance before YHWH represents a significant recurring motif in the Book of the Twelve, especially because of the way it functions within the recurring theme of the fertility/infertility of the land (see also [Repentance in Amos 4:6–12 and the Book of the Twelve] in Amos 4). Thematically and linguistically, the call to “return to me” in Mal 3:6–7 echoes Zech 1:2–6 with a call to repentance for the current generation based on the failure of “the ancestors” to do so. But these two texts balance two texts in the earlier portion of the corpus, Joel 2:12–14 and Amos 4:6–12. When read together, these four texts form a web of interrelated images and formulations that add texture to the historical allusions in Malachi. Immediately following a description of the attacking army on the day of YHWH (Joel 2:1–11, which ends with an allusion to Mal 3:2), Joel 2:12–14 pronounces a call to repentance based on the compassionate character of YHWH, in the hope that YHWH will respond positively, leaving the land fertile once again. By contrast, Amos 4:6–12 recounts numerous times in which YHWH acted in judgment against YHWH’s own people who refused to return to YHWH. Six times Amos 4:6–12 drives home the point by the refrain, “yet you did not return to me.” Zech 1:2–6 issues another call to repentance that recounts the failure of the ancestors to respond positively. This passage notes, almost in passing, that Zechariah’s generation does repent, and this section creates the changes necessary to rebuild the temple (combined with Haggai). Still, by the end of Zech 1–8, it becomes clear that tension has once again arisen between the people’s expectations for immediate fertility of the land and YHWH’s expectations that people’s behavior should prove to YHWH that the people have changed (see discussion of Zech 8:9–12). When one looks at Malachi in this light, it is clear that the situation has continued to degenerate following the admonitions of Zech 8:9–12.

to the coming day of YHWH anticipated in 3:1–5, but the connection is also made by assuming a broader literary and theological context than merely Malachi 3:1–5. In a real sense, the backdrop against which one should hear this text extends to the entire Book of the Twelve because of the nature of this recurring motif (see [Returning to YHWH in the Book of the Twelve] in Mal 3:6–7).

Malachi 3:6–7. The first portion of 3:6–12 talks about the consistency of YHWH and of the people. Fortunately for the people, YHWH consistently offers a way for them to survive (3:6). Unfortunately, the people consistently turn their backs on that offer (3:7). What holds these two ideas together is a call to repentance in 3:7 (“Return to me!”) and the people’s complete lack of understanding (“How shall we return?”).

[Returning to YHWH in the Book of the Twelve] Here, in the final portions of the Book of the Twelve, the people

appear no more capable of hearing YHWH's call than they did at the beginning of Hosea.

Malachi 3:7 remains with the image of continuity but ironically reverses the focus and the quality of that consistency. Instead of YHWH's constancy and compassion, Malachi 3:7 focuses on the consistent, long-standing tendency of YHWH's people to turn away from their covenant responsibilities. The polyvalent phrase "since the days of your ancestors" can be interpreted in any number of ways because the Hebrew word "fathers" (*ʾābōt*) can refer literally to fathers or it can refer to male relatives of previous generations extending back into the distant past. The most prevalent interpretation treats this phrase as a reference to the generation of the exodus wanderings, thus reiterating the recalcitrance of YHWH's people as a constant hallmark of their behavior. In a certain sense, such a reading makes even more sense when one considers the role of Malachi as the conclusion to the prophetic corpus, a role made more evident by the editorial conclusion of the book (see Mal 4:1–6). A second interpretive move envisions the phrase as part of an oral prophetic context in which this Persian period prophet confronted a particular group of individuals in order to change behavior that had gone on for two generations. Third, the phrase can be understood as inclusive, meaning essentially that the prophet here accuses the nation of breaking YHWH's commandments and statutes generation after generation.

Statutes can refer to particular commands, to collections of legal or cultic material, or to general precepts. In all probability, the original composition of 3:7 implicitly includes those statutes about which the prophet has confronted the people and the priests earlier in the book (stipulations for offerings, idolatry, infidelity, oppression, and violence).

Understanding the presumptions about the people's question in this disputation depends on how one imagines the context. The question ("How shall we return?") can be interpreted sympathetically or sarcastically. Since the majority of the disputation material in Malachi confronts the priests for misleading the people, one could assume that the prophet considers the people ignorant of what they are to do. In this case, the admonitions that follow can be heard in a simple didactic vein: if you don't know, then let me tell you. On the other hand, the charges that are leveled against the people imply cognizance. It is not that they don't know they are to

bring offerings to YHWH; it is that they try to slide by, to offer the bare minimum, and to skirt the regulations. In this sense, then, one can readily recognize the sarcasm implied by the question. They pretend not to know, but nobody is fooled—not the prophet, not the people, and certainly not YHWH. In either case, the prophet’s words confront the people to change their behavior.

Prior to 3:6-12, Malachi portrays the priests and the people alike as corrupt, self-serving, and resistant to fulfilling their covenant obligations. Malachi 3:7 begins by recalling the failure of the ancestors to return because they consistently turned aside from following the statutes of YHWH. Malachi 3:7 issues a call to repentance that linguistically parallels Zechariah 1:3: “Return to me . . . and I will return to you.” The implications are significant for reading this motif in the Book of the Twelve. The situation of the people addressed differs in Malachi from that of Zechariah 1:6, where the people repented, and the change comes from the fact that the people have not done what YHWH required (Zech 1:2-6; 8:9-12) and what they had said they would do (Zech 1:6). In Malachi 3:6-12, the promise of Zechariah 8:12 has not been fulfilled. Zechariah 8:12 promises fertility for the ground, rain from the sky, and fruit from the vine. Because the people have not fulfilled their end of the bargain in Malachi 3:6-12, the rain does not come, the land is being devoured, the soil does not produce, and the vine is barren. Yet once again YHWH offers the people a chance to repent. Indeed, Malachi 3:6 claims that YHWH does not change with respect to the compassion with which YHWH exhibits. One can see time and again how consistently YHWH’s call to return has been delivered to YHWH’s people within the Book of the Twelve.

Malachi 3:8-9. Malachi 3:8-9 responds to the people’s question in 3:7 with one from the prophet (“Will anyone rob God?”) followed immediately by an accusation against the people (“You are robbing me”) and another question from the people (“How are we robbing you?”). This rapid-fire dialogue quickly challenges the people’s approach to their covenant obligations. The question that begins the verse expects a negative answer (“No one would dare rob God”), but the prophet tells the people that is exactly what they are doing. The charge implies dire consequences.

The reference to tithes and offerings in 3:8 has been the subject of investigation that offers a clearer picture of this combination in light of cultic practice in the Persian period. Petersen has demon-

strated that the words translated by the NRSV as tithes and offerings do not refer to tithes and general offerings.⁸ Rather, the phrase refers to a two-stage levy on produce, a tax used to support the cultic institutions. The word “tithe” refers to the 10 percent tax on the population that was collected by the Levites in regional storehouses across Judah, while the second term, *těřûmâ*, refers to the 10 percent tax on the material collected by the Levites, which is supposed to be delivered to the temple in Jerusalem. In essence, then, this challenge is connected to both the people as a whole and to the Levites.

Malachi 3:9 describes the current situation as a curse caused by the widespread corruption of the people and priests who refuse to perform their duties properly. YHWH speaks as though personally offended, repeating the accusation of 3:8 (“you are robbing me”) prior to offering a challenge on how to change the situation beginning in 3:10.

Malachi 3:10-12. Malachi 3:10-12 offers the prophet’s solution to the current dilemma: fulfill your obligations with the tithes and YHWH will restore the land. Reference to the full tithe (literally, “all the tithe”) brought to the storehouse should not be understood as a full 10 percent, but the tithe tax that should be brought from the regional collection points to the storehouse at the temple site. Nehemiah 13:10-12 shows that the withholding of the temple tax—and perhaps even the tithes themselves—occurred, perhaps as a protest from the Levites.

The idea of testing YHWH was controversial. On the one hand, several texts in the Old Testament describe the actions of notable personalities who test God in some fashion. These include Gideon who put out the fleece (Judg 6:36-40) and Isaiah’s command to Ahaz to ask for a sign, which Ahaz refused to do because it would be testing God (Isa 7:10-12). On the other hand, other texts warn against this practice because of the dangers involved in questioning YHWH’s integrity. Malachi 3:10 obviously falls among the group that presupposes it is permissible to test God, but that attitude raises difficult theological questions. [Testing YHWH] Just as significant for this context, Malachi 3:15 assumes that testing God represents one of the characteristics of the wicked. Two differences stand out between Malachi 3:10 and 3:15. First, the command in 3:10 comes in the form of a divine speech, so that YHWH expects them to obey. This creates a catch-22 for the hearers since if they obey this

Testing YHWH



In Part II (chapters 4–7) of his work, *Defending God*, J. L. Crenshaw aptly illustrates the theological framework from which biblical responses to suffering derive as two paradoxes. On one line of the continuum, one finds ample evidence of the paradox between ancient Near Eastern ideas concerning divine sovereignty on the one side, where nothing that happens is contrary to God's will, and human freedom to make decisions on the other side, decisions that YHWH does not control but whose consequences affect both the character and the fate of those who make them. Opportunities for clashes between these two ideas abound. The second line of the continuum concerns God's character, specifically the polarities between the justice demanded by God's righteousness and the vulnerability of God created by God's desire to love and be loved. Mal 3:10 illustrates the perfect storm of the

conundrum created by the intersection of these lines of continuum. The people in Malachi continue to perpetuate behavior that constitutes an affront to the righteousness of YHWH and demands justice in the form of a curse on the fertility of the land. God's righteousness demands that this justice continue until such time as they willingly choose to change that behavior. On the other hand, God's love inclines God toward compassion, but that compassion—like the justice—depends on how humans respond. Hence, in the conceptual world of Malachi, YHWH's plea to the people to test him is not, in actuality, a test of YHWH but a test of the people themselves. YHWH knows how YHWH will respond if the people choose to move toward righteousness and live in obedience.

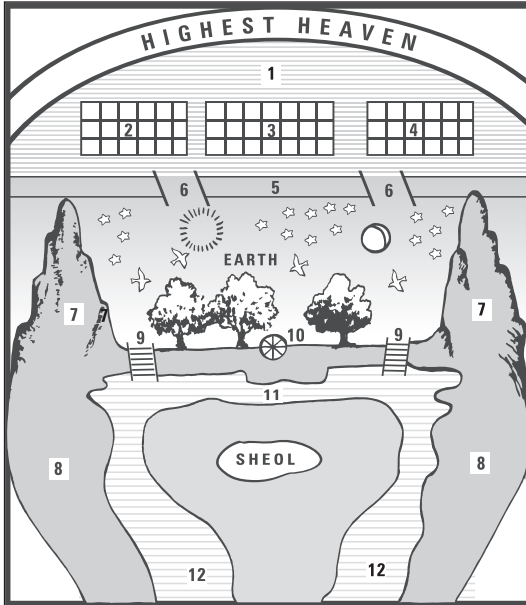
James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 75–131.

command, they disobey Deuteronomy 6:16. Second, in another logical loop, the testing in 3:10 allows YHWH to keep YHWH's promises. The test in 3:10 is not something new, but an appeal to keep the covenant obligations that will, in turn, allow YHWH to restore the land in a blessing. By contrast, the wicked in 3:15 have acted on their own accord in direct opposition to YHWH's expectations, thereby essentially daring God to make good on his promises to curse those who break their covenant obligations.

The phrase “windows of heaven” in 3:10 presupposes a conceptualization of the cosmos of the ancient Near East in which the dome of heaven held back the water above the earth (cf. Gen 1:7). The water was released in the form of rain, and the latches of the windows of heaven were opened so that the water beyond the dome could fall on the earth. The point of the test, though, is to allow YHWH to remove the curse from the land. The curse has brought a devourer (usually interpreted as a locust) and drought upon the land (3:10). These images reflect the dynamics of Joel 1–2, where a series of locust/nations invades the land one after the other, affecting the land's ability to produce and the people's ability to bring suitable offerings. Drought and other natural calamities add insult to injury, and this situation in Joel foreshadows the coming day of YHWH, unless and until the people repent in hopes that YHWH “will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him” (2:14). In Joel, this situation causes mockery from the nations (2:17) that can only be changed when YHWH ends the punish-

Windows of Heaven

In the ancient world, rain was often conceived as coming from waters beyond the heavens. In the image on the right (from a 16th-century European woodcutting), the world is conceived as round while God lives beyond the heavens and a layer of water circulates above them. The diagram below depicts the ancient Hebrew cosmology, when the world was conceptualized as flat.



Key to representation above: 1) waters above the firmament; 2) storehouses for snow; 3) storehouses for hail; 4) chambers of winds; 5) firmament; 6) sluice; 7) pillars of the sky; 8) pillars of the earth; 9) fountain of the deep; 10) navel of the earth; 11) waters under the earth; 12) rivers of the nether world.



Genesis. Frontispiece Depicting the Creation, from the Luther Bible, 1st edition, 1534. Colored woodcut. Private Collection. (Credit: Art Resource, NY)

ment by sending the rains. The connections to Malachi 3:6-12 are obvious: the current setting is a precursor to the day of YHWH (3:1; 4:1). Drought and locusts resulted from the failure of the people to repent (see Mal 3:7). The current situation is deemed a curse (3:9) that only YHWH can change into a blessing (3:10). Only then will the locust-devourer stop destroying the land. Only then will the nations see Judah as a land of delight (3:12) rather than a byword among the nations.

Challenging Theodicy, 3:13-15

Malachi 3:13-15 concludes the disputation material in Malachi with a charge against the people that they have spoken harshly about YHWH (3:13). This charge is followed by two more specific

charges that (1) the people claim there is no profit to be had in following YHWH (3:14); and (2) they have confused prosperity with blessing (3:15). Thereafter, 3:16-18 narrates the response of those fearing YHWH, while 4:1-3 (MT 3:19-21) returns to describing the coming day of YHWH, and 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) draws on figures of the ancient past to bring the prophetic canon to a close. This final disputation, 3:13-15, satirically challenges two groups of people. Implicitly but distinctly, these verses condemn the behavior of those who flaunt their disobedience, even while they confront another group of people who see the financial success of this disobedient group as evidence that serving God has no reward.

This disputation presumes the classic theodicy problem (see the discussion of the recurring motif of theodicy in the introduction to the Book of the Twelve at the beginning of this commentary). If God rewards the righteous, then why do the wicked prosper? Whether the second group acts from discouragement or skepticism is not stated, but the prophet challenges their conclusions. This prophetic challenge aims directly at two issues: motivation for serving God and the character of evil. First, the prophet challenges those who, for whatever reason, have become convinced that they have gained nothing from serving God because others who do not serve God fare better than they do. At issue here is the selfish expectation that one serves God to gain profit. Second, Malachi 3:15 quotes the people as having lost sight of the nature of a righteous life versus a wicked life. According to the prophet, they consider the insolent, those doing evil, and those testing God as people to be envied and emulated. The qualities of righteousness and service do not factor into their calculations of what makes a good life because they base those calculations on selfish interests. “If someone else can be arrogant and get their way, then why can’t I? If someone else can prosper monetarily by flaunting their disobedience to covenant obligations, then why can’t I?”

These quotes of the people by the prophet are not designed to change the behavior of the arrogant and the evildoers. Rather, these quotes are designed to change the attitudes of believers, of those willing to hear and to question their own motives.

This brief, final disputation receives no command from YHWH, no imperative to change, to stop, or to repent. Rather, 3:16-18 narrates a positive response, presumably to the book’s preceding disputations, by a group of listeners who take heed. Malachi

3:13-15 ends the disputation abruptly because the implications should be obvious: you have a choice in life—to please God or to serve your own selfish ambitions. The fate of the arrogant is not immediately taken up, though 4:1 will return to this topic and make clear that they will be the target of the fast-approaching day of YHWH. Before that happens, the voice of a narrator disrupts the disputation to recount the effects of this speech. Those fearing YHWH begin speaking among themselves, causing YHWH to take note and act (3:16). Malachi 3:14 pointedly accuses the people of being so selfish that they break the fourth commandment. Exodus 20:7 commands the people not to take the Lord God’s name in vain, while Malachi 3:14 has them speak the very words that serving God is vain. This charge is then sarcastically connected to desire for personal gain. If one is going to go to all the trouble to keep YHWH’s commandments or to repent, then what’s in it for me?

Malachi 3:15 refers to three modes of behavior, all of which reverse the expectations that God has for God’s covenant people. Arrogant people fight to get their way and take what they want. Those doing evil harm others by taking from them or by inflicting injury on them. Both groups test God by their actions without seeming to suffer for doing so. Yet the speech does not explicitly challenge their behavior. Rather, by placing the quote in the mouth of the people as a whole, the prophet forces readers to confront their own envy of those who prosper by taking advantage of others. The confrontation ends in the narration of the people’s response that begins 3:16. The ending is abrupt but powerful. If the listeners think that the arrogant and evildoers are better off than they are, then these listeners cannot understand why it is not vain to serve God. The fate of the arrogant and the evildoers is not left hanging indefinitely. Malachi 4:1 specifies them as the target of the coming day of YHWH.

A Book of Remembrance Is Written, 3:16-18

Malachi 3:16-18 abruptly interrupts the speech of YHWH, and its confrontation of the people, with a narrative report regarding a response by one group labeled simply as “those fearing YHWH” (3:16). (See [Levites] and [Priestly Conflict] in Malachi 2.) This narrated response recounts how the group members spoke among them-

selves, which in turn gets YHWH's attention. YHWH then has a book of remembrance recorded for them (a book that will help them discern between the righteous and the wicked according to 3:18) and announces that YHWH announces the decision to spare them on the coming day of YHWH (3:17).

Malachi 3:16–18 represents a narrative intrusion into YHWH's speech that reports the response of one group (those fearing YHWH) along with YHWH's response. This passage is often misunderstood based on later traditions about the final judgment wherein the names of the faithful are recorded in a book of life. However, this book of life concept represents neither the

Translating Malachi 3:16

Ω Translations of this verse have frequently been colored by Christian eschatological ideas that do not convey accurately the meaning of the Hebrew.

NAS: The LORD gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written *before* him (*lěfānayw*) *for* (*lě*) those who fear the LORD . . .

NRSV: The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written *before* him (*lěfānayw*) *of* (*lě*) those who revered the LORD . . .

NIV: The LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written *in his presence* (*lěfānayw*) *concerning* (*lě*) those who feared the LORD . . .

For example, of the NAS, NRSV, and NIV translations, only the NAS properly conveys the second preposition. All three correctly interpret the first preposition to indicate that the book was written in front of YHWH, but the NIV and, to a lesser extent, the NRSV treat the second preposition as indicative of the content of the book rather than those who shall receive the book. This combination of the verb “to write” with the preposition *lě* indicates the addressee (to write to someone) or the receiver of the writing (to write something for someone).

only nor the best means for interpreting Malachi 3:16–18. Understanding this passage requires that one account for the syntactical relationships between all three verses as well as the conceptual framework out of which the report is given. This understanding involves four points.

First, the phrase “book of remembrance” has its closest parallel in Esther 6:1, which uses the plural form “book of remembrances.” It refers to the annals of the king, a record of events from the king's reign—not a list of names. Second, the syntax of 3:16 indicates the book was written for the benefit of those fearing YHWH, not for YHWH. Malachi 3:16 refers to the book as part of YHWH's response to those who fear YHWH who spoke with one another after being confronted with their own actions in 3:13–15. YHWH's response (he took note and listened) leads to the writing of the book of remembrance, but here is where

most English translations miscommunicate the syntactical relationship of the verb and the prepositions. [Translating Malachi 3:16]

A clear illustration of this formulation can be seen in the statute concerning divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1: “If a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds indecency in her, then he will *write for* (*lě*) her a certificate (literally, book) of divorce.” When Malachi 3:16 is seen in light of

Deuteronomy 24:1, not only is the NAS translation preferable, but it is clear the book is intended for those fearing YHWH rather than for YHWH. When one reads this phrase and understands the book of remembrance as a record of the actions of the king, then the picture that develops is one in which a scroll containing YHWH's actions was written to give to those fearing YHWH.

Third, the instructional role of this book becomes even clearer when one reads Malachi 3:18, where the purpose of the book of remembrance is specified. The book was written (3:16) “. . . so you shall again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.” The purpose of the book, then, can be deduced as a record of YHWH's actions recorded for YHWH's covenant partners to help them distinguish righteousness from wickedness and proper from improper service to God. It is no great leap in logic to suggest that the Book of the Twelve could be the book to which Malachi 3:16 refers. It recounts the actions of YHWH from the Assyrian period to the Persian period. One of its recurring motifs has been the string of theodicy texts that draw on Exodus 34:6-7 to teach about YHWH's compassion and justice (see discussions of Joel 2:12-14; 3:21 [MT 4:21] paired with Mic 7:18-20; and Nah 1:2-3), as well as other indications that the prophetic material should be used for discerning the proper paths upon which to walk (see Hos 14:9 [14:10]).

Fourth, this image of YHWH providing a book that will serve as a guide to the faithful can be documented in other ancient Near Eastern literature, most notably apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period. To be sure, the image of a heavenly book containing information about humans can be found in or implied from biblical texts (Pss 69:29; 139:16; Isa 4:3; Neh 13:14; and Dan 7:10), but none of these is called a book of remembrance; none unambiguously refers to a book listing those to be delivered on the day of judgment; and, most important, the book in question is never given to the faithful as in Malachi 3:16. [Heavenly Books]

By contrast, other texts refer to a book (scroll) given to the faithful for guidance (Exod 24:4-7;

Heavenly Books



Ps 69:28 (MT 69:29) refers to the “book of the living” as the place where the names of living humans are kept, but the context is an imprecation against enemies whom the psalmist wants expunged from the book. Ps 139:16 refers to a book that records in advance the days of the psalmist, predetermining the length of his life. Isa 4:3 seems to presume a similar kind of book, speaking of a remnant recorded (i.e., written) for life in Jerusalem. Neh 13:14 does not specifically mention a book, but the plea that YHWH not “blot out” Nehemiah's good deeds has sometimes been interpreted as presuming a book of life containing deeds of humans. This interpretation, however, is disputed. Dan 7:10 is likely the latest of these texts, and it refers to books that are opened in the judgment scene by the heavenly tribunal. The content of the books is not explained, but one can deduce they contained either the record of the deeds of those “beasts” being judged or else the books were to record the outcome.

Books of Instruction



This instructional scroll is precisely how the writing of the Book of the Covenant given to Moses is interpreted. Exod 24:4-7 relates that Moses wrote down the words YHWH spoke (24:4), then read this Book of the Covenant prompting a promise of obedience to this covenant (24:7). Neh 8 presumes the divine origin of the book of the Torah that was given to Israel (8:1). Ezra reads from this book while the people listen, and then the Levites help to interpret the readings for the people (8:7-8). Jubilees 23:32 refers to the recorded words (an event from Genesis) as “heavenly tablets” written as testimony for future generations. Jub 30:21 provides an even clearer example when speaking of Levi’s role in avenging the rape of Dinah (Gen 34) in that it presupposes both heavenly tablets describing the events and the content of those tablets (recorded by YHWH) that Moses should convey to the people of Israel so they do not sin: “All this account *I have written for you*, and have commanded you to say to the children of Israel, that they should not commit sin nor transgress the ordinances nor break the covenant which has been ordained for them, (but) that they should fulfill it and *be recorded* as friends.”

In this encounter, YHWH writes about the events of Levi’s role that were recorded on heavenly tablets. This message was given in written form to Moses who, in turn, should pass it on to the Israelites so that they could learn from Levi’s example and also be recorded as friends in the heavenly tablets. In other words, YHWH writes the words taken from the heavenly tablets and then provides them to the people for instruction.

Jub 23:32; 30:21). [Books of Instruction] These books are transmitted by God to humans to provide instruction to humans. In the case of Malachi 3:16, the book of remembrance is given to those who fear the LORD, so they will belong to YHWH and learn from this book. These four elements together suggest that the “book of remembrance” refers to a document given by the LORD to the pious group who respond to the divine exhortation.

Malachi 3:17 begins with a *waw* conjunction that relates the subsequent action to that which has preceded. The action of 3:17 could refer to one of two elements. It could refer to the consequences of the group’s action or to the book being written. Malachi 3:17 is often interpreted as the latter, as an indication that YHWH has recorded the names of the YHWH fearers in the book for future reference when YHWH acts in judgment. While such a reading makes some sense of this verse, it does

not fully do justice to the context. The book is written because the group understood that they were to revere YHWH and consider his name (3:16). The book was written to help instruct this group on what that means, not to set their names aside. Malachi 3:17 represents the purpose of the book more than the consequence of recording a list of names. The book is written for those fearing YHWH so that they will belong to YHWH.

The didactic purpose of the book of remembrance written for those fearing YHWH becomes clear in 3:18. The conjunction *waw*, which the NRSV translates as “then,” refers to the writing of the book in 3:16. Like 3:17, the opening conjunction indicates a relationship with the preceding material. Here, the verb “to see” means to “understand,” “distinguish,” or “discern.” This verb can even appear in juridical contexts (see 1 Sam 24:16). The prepositional construction “between . . . to” also indicates two opposing elements in a dichotomy, whether those elements be in the natural

world (Gen 1:6), cultic qualities (Lev 20:25), or legal categories (Deut 17:8). This construction appears twice in Malachi 3:18, contrasting the righteous and the wicked and those who serve God versus those who do not. The question not often addressed is who is doing the discerning in 3:18. The second masculine plural verb forms clearly indicate it is not YHWH. The fact that this action is conceived as a return to something (“you shall *again* see the difference”) strongly suggests that the group addressed is none other than the YHWH fearers themselves.

Punishment of the Wicked and Survival of the Righteous on the Coming Day, 4:1-3

The fate of the people on the day of YHWH becomes the subject once again in 4:1-3. The line of thought that broke off abruptly in 3:15 is resumed by affirming that those taunting YHWH in 3:15 (the arrogant and the evildoers) will indeed be punished (4:1), and those fearing YHWH’s name shall celebrate (4:2) and realize that the wicked have been punished (4:3).

The questions concerning the fate of the wicked and the problems of theodicy that were raised by the preceding disputations, culminating in 3:13-15, receive an explicit response in 4:1. In essence, Malachi 4:1 affirms the moral formula of retribution on the wicked, with the concomitant idea that judgment has only been delayed. Whereas 3:13-15 confronts those who think that the non-punishment of the arrogant and the evildoers means that YHWH does not really care about the moral order of the universe, Malachi 4:1 claims that precisely these two groups will be targets on the day of YHWH that will soon arrive. The link between these two passages is an inherent one. In 4:1, YHWH affirms the traditional idea that the wicked will be judged (and soon), but YHWH will control when that happens. There are good reasons for suggesting that the two passages originally belonged together, though they are now separated by 3:16-18. [Insertion of Malachi 3:16-18] At any rate, 3:15 affirms that judgment on the wicked is YHWH’s prerogative, and YHWH’s timing should not affect whether the righteous adhere to their covenant obligations.

Malachi 4:2 affirms that not only will the arrogant and evildoers be punished but also those who fear the name of YHWH will be rewarded on the day that quickly approaches. Malachi 4:2 focuses on the fate of the group who were the subject of 3:16-18—those

Insertion of Malachi 3:16-18

Mal 3:13-15 and 4:1-3 form a much more natural disputation in that the quote of the people basically complains that the wicked prosper (3:14-15), while 4:1-3 rejects that claim by saying that the same people who appear to be prospering now (the arrogant and the evildoers) will be annihilated on the day of YHWH. YHWH's people—or a portion thereof—will rejoice and celebrate once the wicked have been destroyed. In other words, justice is delayed but not for long.

3:13 You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against you?"

14 You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the LORD of hosts? 15 Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape."

4:1 But, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you, those who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. 3 And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

3:16 Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him for those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. 17 They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. 18 Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Note that 3:16-18 accounts for the creation of a righteous remnant as a group that responded positively to the prophet's message. The name for this group (those fearing YHWH) also appears in 4:2 (MT 3:20), but in a manner that is syntactically superfluous. This group may have been added to 4:2 when 3:16-18 was inserted, though it could already have been present.

fearing YHWH. The description of the triumph of those who fear YHWH over the wicked is completed in Malachi 4:3. The righteous tread on the wicked who have been utterly decimated. This image combines the metaphors for the day of YHWH in the preceding verses wherein the day will burn like an oven (4:1) and YHWH will burn the dross from the gold and silver with the fire of the refiner (3:2).

The sun of righteousness that brings healing in its wings in 4:2 has been interpreted as both an epithet for YHWH and as figurative language describing the day of YHWH wherein the light brings salvation and joy. One can combine the two ideas by reflecting on the winged solar disk that appears prominently in the ancient Near East.

Winged Solar Disk

The winged solar disk appears in many countries across a lengthy span of time in the ancient Near East as a symbol of divine power and protection.

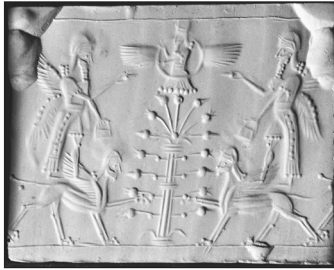
The picture on the left is an Egyptian mummy from the fourth century BCE. It depicts the winged figure of Maat with the solar disk at the top of her head.

The middle picture comes from the palace of Ashur-nasir-pal II (a ninth-century king at Nimrud).

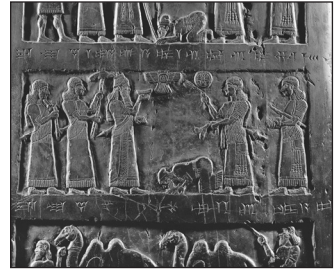
The picture on the right comes from the Black Obelisk at the British Museum, and it shows the solar disk in the middle symbolizing the deity's protection of the king (Shalmaneser III, 859–824 BCE) on the middle left who receives gifts from those he has captured.



Mummified mid-ranking bottom). 4th C. BCE (Dynasty XXX, 378–341 BCE). (Credit: © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY)



An impression from a cylinder seal. The sun god in the winged disk appears above the sacred tree. On each side a winged human figure holds a bucket and stands upon the back of a winged bearded sphinx. 1000–612 BCE. Pink jasper. British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)



Jehu, King of Israel, prostrating himself before King Shalmaneser III of Assyria. Basalt bas-relief on the black stele of Shalmaneser III. Assyrian, 9th BCE. British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

Connecting to the Canon, 4:4-6

Malachi 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) is widely recognized is a later addition that functions as the conclusion not just to Malachi but to the entire prophetic canon. It connects the law and the prophets by citing Moses and Elijah and also by alluding to the transition from Moses to Joshua (the move from the Torah to the Prophets (*Nebi'im*)). [Malachi 4:4-6 and the End of the *Nebi'im*]

The canonical allusions continue in Malachi 4:5 (MT 3:23) with reference to Elijah and the specific formulation concerning the day of YHWH. After referring to Moses, who dominates the story of the Pentateuch from Exodus onward, Malachi 4:5 refers to the most prominent prophet of the Former Prophets, Elijah, about whom more narrative exists than any other prophet in the ongoing story from Joshua through Kings. Another point of connection beyond the canonical progression ties the reference to Moses in 4:4 with the reference to Elijah in to 4:5. Specifically, Old Testament texts speak in reverential and unusual terms about the end of life for three characters: Enoch, Moses, and Elijah. These events become even more prominent in later Jewish writings. [Philo on Enoch, Moses, and Elijah] Genesis 5:21-24 describes Enoch's departure in a way that suggests he did not die: "Enoch walked with God; then he

Malachi 4:4-6 and the End of the *Nebi'im*

W. Rudolph (291) concedes that 4:4 (MT 3:22) by itself could relate to the context, either as an admonition to the righteous after the day of YHWH or as a brief allusion to 3:7, admonishing the righteous using the phrase to “remember” (*zkr*) the law, rather than the phrase “keep” (*šmr*) the statutes. This change could be seen as a nuanced call to the righteous. Rudolph doubts this is the primary motivation since *šmr* could have easily been used if that was the goal, and since the continuation of this unit in 4:5-6 (MT 3:23-24) leaves this idea behind quickly. Instead, Rudolph and others think 4:4 alludes to the transition from the end of the Torah to the beginning of the Prophets. Deut 34 reports Moses’ death as the death of “the servant of YHWH” (Deut 34:5), the same title with which YHWH’s speech to Joshua begins the next book: “My servant Moses is dead” (Josh 1:2). This title is not a common one for Moses in the Pentateuch, appearing elsewhere only in Num 22:18, but it also appears again in Josh 1:7, where Moses admonishes, “. . . do not turn from it (the Torah)” Rudolph ascribes canonical significance to this allusion.

Mal 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24) “is not an addition to Malachi, and not to the Book of the Twelve, but to the entire prophetic canon. That is important for appreciating the Pentateuch. After so much has been said about the work of YHWH through his prophets, it is possible that the Torah, ‘the law of my servant Moses,’ could recede to the background. But that cannot happen because the Torah is the quintessential element of Jewish religion. Therefore, it is self-evident that remembering the Torah also frames the entire prophetic canon.”

Mal 4:4 (MT 3:20) refers to Horeb instead of Sinai as the place where YHWH spoke to Moses. This term is the dominant one used in Deuteronomy for the mountain to which other portions of the Pentateuch refer as Sinai. This term could be interpreted in two ways: either as continuing evidence that the transmission circles of Malachi prefer Deuteronomistic traditions or more simply as part of the connection from the Pentateuch to the Prophets.

Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micha–Nahum–Habakuk–Zephania* (KAT 13/3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975) 291.

was no more, because God took him” (5:24). Deuteronomy 34 describes the death of Moses and even includes a specific statement that Moses died and was buried in the land of Moab. Nevertheless, traditions outside biblical texts postulate how Moses came to find himself in the presence of God.⁹ These traditions make it clear that Moses’ death was treated differently than others. Elijah, as well, was miraculously transported from earth by a whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:9-18). The tradition that Elijah never died was part of what made him such an attractive figure in Malachi and later texts associating him with eschatological judgment. He was available for YHWH to send him back to Israel. Sirach (48:10) reflects an early interpretation of Elijah that also cites Malachi 4:5. This interpretation credits Elijah for calming YHWH’s wrath, turning the hearts of parents to their children, and restoring Jacob at the appointed time.¹⁰ Elijah does not appear in the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or the Twelve) in any text until this one. Moses appears in the Book of the Twelve only here and Micah 6:4. Hence, with both Elijah and Moses so close to one another in this text, one can only assume that a developing sense of canon is at work here.

Malachi 4:5 (MT 3:23) begins in precisely the same way as 3:1, but instead of YHWH announcing the sending of “my messenger,” YHWH announces the imminent sending of Elijah. The desire to

Philo on Enoch, Moses, and Elijah

Philo, the Jewish interpreter from Alexandria who died in the middle of the first century CE, writes the following of Enoch's death:

(86) What is the meaning of the expression, "He was not found because God translated him?" In the first place, the end of virtuous and holy men is not death but a translation and migration, and an approach to some other place of abode. In the second place, in this instance something marvelous did take place; for he was supposed to be carried off in such a way as to be invisible, for then he was not found: and a proof of this is, that he was sought for as being invisible, not only as having been carried away from their sight, since translation into another

place is nothing else than a placing of a person in another situation; but it is here suggested, that he was translated from a visible place, perceptible by the outward senses, into an incorporeal idea, appreciable only to the intellect. This mercy also was bestowed on the great prophet, for his sepulchre also was known to no one. And besides these two there was another, Elijah, who ascended from the things of earth into heaven, according to the divine appearance which was then presented to him, and who thus followed higher things, or, to speak with more exact propriety, was raised up to heaven.

Philo of Alexandria, "Questions and Answers On Genesis, I," in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (trans. Charles Duke Yonge; Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 809 (§86).

identify the messenger from 3:1 represents one of the arguments for understanding this passage as a later epilogue. This sending of Elijah presumes eschatological expectations that a prophet would precede the day of YHWH, expectations that likely developed after the core of Malachi was composed. Moreover, the pronouncement concerning the day of YHWH takes its formulation from Joel 2:31 (MT 3:4), the only other place in the Hebrew Bible to use the formulation "the great and terrible day of YHWH." Further, Malachi 4:5 should be understood as the quoting text because, as Rudolph notes, the name YHWH appears in the cited text, even though YHWH speaks in the first person in the remainder of this unit.¹¹

The concluding verse strikes many as problematic. Already the LXX reflects a text that transposes Malachi 4:4 after 4:6 so that the prophetic corpus does not end with a threat. Clearly 4:6 builds on 4:5, indicating that Elijah is the forerunner of the day of YHWH. He will have the task of reconciling the generations of families to one another. It is not immediately clear why this task would be deemed so important. Three explanations appear frequently enough to bear notice here, but a further observation is also in order. First, several have argued that the purpose of 4:5 is to draw a parallel from the current generation to the generation that adopted the covenant.¹² The call is for the current generation to return to the covenant because only by reconciling their attitudes toward the covenant with those of their ancestors will restoration be fully realized. Second, many tie this call directly to the Elijah story wherein Elijah's action challenged all Israel to decide between YHWH and Baal.¹³ Third, others suggest that one interpret this verse in light of the battle for the hearts and minds of Jewish youth, though dis-

agreement exists whether this was driven by fights between Jewish parents and youth who were drawn to Hellenistic culture (assuming this epilogue was added during the Hellenistic period) or who were themselves the result of mixed marriages condemned in 2:10-16.¹⁴ In this sense, 4:6 serves as a concrete illustration of the need to remember the law of Moses as stated in 4:4, with Elijah serving as mediator between the generations to create a new social order. This battle between parents and children puts the younger generation in danger of breaking YHWH's commandment to honor one's father and mother, a situation that could account for the threat of a curse on the land.

The word translated as curse (*ḥērem*) by the NRSV in 4:6 is not the same noun (*mē'êrâ*) or the same verb used in 2:2 or 3:9. The possibility of smiting the land with a curse represents a more severe threat in that this word, especially in prophetic literature, implies total annihilation. Hill correctly notes that the hope of reconciliation to come from the work of Elijah will not stop the coming day of YHWH.¹⁵ Rather, this reconciliation will prevent a curse on the land.

Petersen sees the canonical resonances of Malachi 3:22-24 as a close cousin of Hosea 14:10 in that both take up language from within the respective book and connect that book to another part of the canon, with Malachi 4:4-6 connecting Malachi to the Torah and the Prophets while Hosea 14:10 connects Hosea to the Writings.¹⁶

CONNECTIONS

As the anticipation of judgment turns toward the future, Malachi's portrayal of the day of YHWH takes at least three contemplative twists. First, Malachi 3:3-5 assumes that reform begins from within. Until the sons of Levi get their act together, no lasting change will happen among the population. The impending day of YHWH becomes the focus of internal change among the leadership before society can change. Second, 3:16-18 demonstrates that reflection on what these changes mean becomes the focus of a remnant group of those fearing YHWH and thinking on YHWH's name. When this group begins speaking among themselves, the reader learns that YHWH had a book written that leads them to

consider the past as a guide (3:16, 18). Third, the impending day of YHWH leads to expectations of reconciliation by focusing on both the Torah and the Prophets (4:4-6). These twists deserve consideration as reflections for the believing community.

1. Reform in Two Stages. Malachi 3:1-2 essentially begins the second half of the book with a warning about the future, and 3:3-5 challenges the descendants of Levi with a message. The coming day of YHWH will first require a purifying judgment on their group if the efficacy of the offerings is ever going to change (3:2-4). This change of the religious leadership will prepare for a second, broader purification of the entire population based on their commitment to covenant obligations (3:5). This warning of a two-stage judgment in 3:3-5 leads to the final confrontation of the people as a whole in Malachi (3:6-12) and of those whose apathy toward these obligations represent a direct challenge to YHWH (3:13-15). The former challenges the people to fulfill their covenant duties by bringing their offerings to YHWH, while the latter warns them against believing that YHWH has stopped caring about such things.

Modern communities of faith tend to react in one of two ways to messages concerning an impending day of judgment caused by YHWH, but in the end neither takes seriously the theological questions raised by eschatological texts. One group tends to ignore these texts outright, while the other devises increasingly complex means by which to take the claims of the text literally. Both groups not only speak past one another but also look past the deeper issues of the text itself. Communities of faith that ignore eschatological passages typically do so from the standpoint of superiority. They look at texts like Malachi 3:1-15 and reject the causal link between religious acts and natural calamities. They do not believe in a God who would cause crops to fail until the community demonstrates its commitment more clearly by filling the offering plates more completely. They realize weather patterns are less random than ancient writers believed, and they chafe at the idea of a God who would target localities with disasters, as though one little piece of the earth had suddenly become demonstrably more wicked than any other. Biblical texts, then, that speak in such terms are merely ignored.

The other group, perhaps notably smaller than it used to be but still a significant presence, demands that these texts be interpreted literally as warnings that God's wrath will supersede the laws of nature in order to punish God's enemies. Of course, those who

make these claims loudest and longest usually rest secure in their beliefs that the calls for change and repentance are directed at others because they themselves could not be guilty. Leaders of these communities often play upon the fears of their congregants and demand ever higher levels of commitment. These literal understandings divide the world into two camps—those who believe like us and the enemies of God.

Both groups fail to take seriously the degree to which these are calls to reorient one's life in the present in order to improve life in the future. The first group does not seriously ask, "Why do we do what we do?" The latter group assumes that the world will end badly, and all they can do is keep the enemies away by clinging more tightly to the belief that they will escape. Malachi 3:1-15 has something to say to both sides. For the first group, Malachi 3:1-15 extrapolates the consequences of apathy and arrogance by arguing that commitment matters, both in terms of quality and quantity. These verses challenge those who go through the motions of religious expression. They challenge those who give a little but could give more: bring the full tithe (3:10). These verses challenge those who hold back their commitment because serving God does not help their bottom line (3:14). These verses challenge those who think a little is enough since, after all, "I do more than most," and the world is full of malevolent characters who prosper in spite of their blatant hostility toward God and humanity (3:15). What we do for God and for one another should be taken seriously. God is unimpressed with halfhearted commitment.

For the second group, Malachi 3:1-15 challenges the smug presumptions that God is only speaking to others. These verses warn that no group is safe from God's wrath. The leaders will be purified by fire before judgment comes to the others (3:3-4). The focus of judgment is not on the enemies in this passage but on the leaders and the members of the community itself. Judgment comes against those who act unethically, who manipulate the superstitions of those around them, who worship things other than God, and who lie and misrepresent positions of others in order to appear more righteous. Just as important, judgment comes against those who fail to look after the weakest in society: against those willing to pay workers less than a full wage; against those whose actions oppress the widow and the orphan; and against those who seek to cast aside the immigrant (3:5). Surviving the day of YHWH should not be a

goal but the byproduct of living in a way that seeks to make the lives of others better in the name of God.

2. Reflection on Those Fearing YHWH. The end of the Book of the Twelve suggests the creation of a book of remembrance for those fearing YHWH that would help this group to reflect on YHWH's acts in order to discern the righteous from the wicked, and to help them commit to keeping the covenant obligations. In Malachi 3:16 one finds a report wherein YHWH responds to those fearing YHWH and thinking on YHWH's name. Only with Malachi 3:18 does the purpose of the book's contents become clearer. The book will allow these YHWH fearers to distinguish again between the righteous and the wicked. In other words, this book remembers YHWH but instructs the faithful. This book raises questions: Who was this group? What did the book contain? And what was supposed to be learned from it?

In response to the first question, the context of the book seems to imply that the group identified itself as descendants of Levi who responded to the teaching of Malachi, the prophetic messenger of YHWH, because they heard the truth of the disputations. The disputations charged that the people were not taking the covenant obligations seriously, and that the priests as a whole were complicit in the loosening of expectations, motivated either by apathy or self-interest. This group considered Levi the model priest and sought their own identity in the covenant promise made to Levi's descendants.

In response to the second and third questions (What did the book contain? And what was supposed to be learned from it?), syntactical analysis suggested that the acts of YHWH constituted the content of what was to be remembered. This book of remembering YHWH serves to instruct the faithful on how to distinguish between the righteous and wicked (3:18). How does this idea relate to the Book of the Twelve specifically? Here, one must remember the teaching role of the priests, especially the Levitical priests. Nehemiah 9 presents an illuminating passage in this respect. In this episode, those of Israelite descent separate themselves from those of foreign descent. They then stand and listen to the reading of the book of the law (9:3), and several prominent Levites who had constructed stairs for the occasion then lead them in praising YHWH (9:4-5) before Ezra stands up and begins summarizing the Torah narrative (9:6-23).

Ezra's narrative does not, however, stop with the end of the Pentateuch but continues to recount the taking of the land (9:24-25) and the time of the judges (9:26-31). This narrative emphasizes the people's turning their backs on the ordinances of YHWH and ignoring the warnings of the prophets. At this point, Ezra's narrative summary turns to the time of the kings, and in so doing it also begins to incorporate both the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. Rather than mentioning specific kings, Ezra's narrative characterizes YHWH's actions as keeping covenant and *hesed* while YHWH was forced to deal harshly with "our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people, *since the time of the kings of Assyria until today*" (9:32; emphasis added). These people ignored the Torah, broke the commandments, and ignored the (prophetic) warnings YHWH sent (9:34). Ezra's interpretation of history thus emphasizes YHWH's patience until the time of the kings of Assyria, using an allusion to Exodus 34:6-7, over against the wickedness of the leaders and the ancestors (9:33, 35).¹⁷ The fact that Ezra cites the kings of Assyria and not the invasion of Babylon implies that Ezra's speech is working canonically rather than historically at this point—though it is doubtful that the prophetic canon existed in the exact form we have it now.

Both Isaiah and the Book of the Twelve begin recounting the words of prophets in the eighth century, when Assyria overthrew Israel and then Judah. This means that, in Nehemiah 9, the punishment phase did not begin with the rise of Babylon but more than a century earlier. Nehemiah 9 also ties the rejection of the prophetic message to the punishment that began in the eighth century. This understanding of history comports remarkably well with the form and function of the Book of the Twelve (and the prophetic canon as a whole). Understanding the Book of the Twelve as a compendium of God's prophetic message from the eighth century to the Persian period helps to concretize this view of Ezra's teaching wherein the prophetic message was ignored.

For modern communities of faith, this discussion can play a didactic role and a hermeneutical role. Understanding the prophetic corpus as testimony by "those fearing YHWH" to God's work in the world plays an important didactic function for communities that take the biblical message seriously. Those fearing YHWH respond to a report about the role of the prophets in the story of Israel and Judah. The prophets are seen as a group acting in

consort with YHWH's intention over a lengthy period of time. The prophets are not treated merely as charismatic individuals whose message is intended to be remembered in isolation from the larger story or treated as isolated verses whose secrets remain hidden until someone comes along later with the secret meaning revealed. Rather, the message testifies to the fact that prophets confront the believing community with a word of God that dialogues with those of other prophets.

However, for modern communities of faith, recognition of this testimony is only the first step in the process of reflection. Recognition of the Book of the Twelve as testimony to God's work in Israel and Judah becomes merely an archaic history lesson if the reflection on these texts does not go further. Modern communities of faith should explore analogies for today, and they should ask what has changed. Analogies between communities of faith and "those fearing YHWH" on one level are not difficult to imagine, but on another level they raise complex issues for people of faith today. The big issues for the prophets still challenge communities of faith today: justice (legal, economic, and ethical); care for the poor; calling people to change from selfish, obsessive behavior to a life of commitment; recognizing one's need of God; and offering hope for a broken world. On the other hand, these issues become mere slogans if they do not manifest themselves in concrete actions and programs.


Therein lies part of the problem: defining what these desirable actions look like. For some communities of faith, care for the poor and economic justice involve acts of individual charity, while for others these issues involve social programs or changing laws. What happens when these commitments come into conflict with other communities of faith? One could, for example, follow the example of confrontation exhibited in Malachi 2:3 by demonizing those with whom one finds disagreement: "I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence." This is frequently the approach taken to public discussions on cable news shows that are more interested in polarizing figures for the sake of ratings than with finding common ground. Or one could begin an honest dialogue, recognizing that each side came to their position based on a desire to do what is right. Often, positions that seem like polar opposites can find areas of agreement if they seek solutions rather than seek to win the argument.

3. The Day of YHWH. Anticipation of the coming day of YHWH returns explicitly as a topic beginning in 4:1. Malachi 4:1-3 refers to the fate of the two groups who play a pivotal role in 3:13-15 (the arrogant and the evildoers) and 3:16-18 (those fearing YHWH's name). Malachi 4:4-6 (MT 3:22-24), with its citation of Joel, not only ties into other passages in Malachi (e.g., 3:10) but also provides a context from which to understand Malachi's eschatological expectations. Hill notes that the citations of Joel "establish the eschatological context of the day of YHWH for restored Israel as a day of an outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 3:2; cf. Num 11:16-25; Zech 12:10), celestial portents (Joel 3:3-4; cf. Hag 2:21), judgment for Israel's enemies (Joel 4:1-3; cf. Zech 12:1-9), and deliverance for the righteous of Israel (Joel 3:4; cf. Zech 13:1)."¹⁸

These eschatological expectations do not represent the ramblings of a member of some sectarian fringe group. Rather, these verses demand that readers (ancient and modern) connect the Law and the Prophets, the instruction of Moses and the deeds of Elijah. This canonical ending, in all likelihood post-dating the original composition of Malachi by some time, reflects awareness of a canonical sense that interpreted the law and the prophets together. The law of Moses holds the key, but it will take the mediation of the prophet Elijah to reconcile the current generation with the ways of the ancestors before the day of YHWH arrives. Zechariah 13:9 alludes to the beginning and end of the Book of the Twelve when it cites

Hosea and Malachi together. Malachi 4:4-6 extends this canonical perspective back to the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua, thus connecting the end of the Torah (Deuteronomy) and the beginning of the Prophets (Joshua) with the conclusion of the Prophets to admonish those fearing YHWH to keep the task before them because much is riding on the outcome. [Prophets and Nebi'im]

Prophets and *Nebi'im*

 This discussion uses Prophets to refer to the canonical section of the *Nebi'im* that consists of the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets in the Jewish canon. The Former Prophets consist of four scrolls—Joshua, Judges, (1–2) Kings, (1–2) Samuel—and the Latter Prophets consisted of four scrolls—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve.

Modern Christian communities of faith may require some education at this point. Too often in the past, the use of Old Testament texts by Christian communities largely drew on supercessionist theology (i.e., the assumption that Christian theology "supersedes" that of the Old Testament). Yet the church has also continually reiterated that the Old Testament remains part of the Christian canon. The church has made this claim for various reasons, but the most significant reason is that the New Testament presumes one knows

the stories, the themes, the theology, and the God of the Old Testament. A new covenant makes little sense without an old covenant. The end of Malachi asks readers to hear the Law and the Prophets, the core of the testimony about God in the Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament is not merely a precursor to the New Testament; it is God's word to God's people. The prophets challenge God's people to consider what it means to live by God's instruction. Jesus' teachings do the same. The prophets speak of hope that God's kingdom will come on earth. Paul's letters do the same. The Christian canon continues in Matthew; it does not start there.

Malachi's connection of Elijah with Moses finds an intriguing parallel for Christians in the story of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). [The Transfiguration] Each Gospel writer has a different ending (or application) for the story, but con-

The Transfiguration



The three Synoptic Gospels tell the story of Elijah and Moses appearing with Jesus in front of the disciples, in part to connect Jesus with the Law and Prophets:

Matthew 17:1-8: Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard *this*, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched *them* and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Mark 9:2-8: Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; and his garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus,

"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved son, listen to him!" All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.

Luke 9:28-36: Some eight days after these sayings, he took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face became different, and his clothing *became* white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. And as these were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not realizing what he was saying. While he was saying this, a cloud formed and *began* to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my son, *my* chosen one; listen to him!" And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.

notations of Moses and Elijah as evocative of the Law and the Prophets certainly play a role in the telling of this story, placing Jesus in the company of both.

NOTES

1. Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 264.

2. See the commentary on Joel 2:11, which shows Joel's combination of quotes from Zephaniah and Malachi to frame a description of the enemy attacking on the day of YHWH.

3. Petersen is by no means alone. See the discussions of others who have treated portions of this material as secondary (David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 209; Hill, *Malachi*, 260; Pieter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 283.

4. See Beth Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* (SBLDS 98; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 147–48.

5. See Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, *Levitén und Priester: Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kultpersonals* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1965).

6. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 212–14.

7. Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger*, 173.

8. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 215–16.

9. Concerning the large amount of legendary material concerning the death of Moses, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 3:466–73; 6:158–64.

10. Jewish tradition contains numerous references to Elijah's involvement with the coming time of the Messiah. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 4:233–35; 6:339–42.

11. Wilhelm Rudolph, *Haggai–Sacharja 1–8–Sacharja 9–14–Maleachi* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament 13/4; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976) 291.

12. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 342–43; Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 232; Hill, *Malachi*, 386–88.

13. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 230; Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 495–96; Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi*, 268.

14. Rudolph, *Haggai–Sacharja 1–8–Sacharja 9–14–Maleachi*, 292. For illustrations of the latter view, see Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 342.

15. Hill, *Malachi*, 388.

16. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 233.

17. It may be significant that Ezra's allusion to Exod 34:6-7 is the same text cited four times in the Book of the Twelve, all in the sections that come before the fall of Assyria in the flow of the Twelve: Joel 2:12-13; 3:19-21 (MT 4:19-21); Mic 7:19-20; Nah 1:3.

18. Hill, *Malachi*, 386.

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INDEX OF MODERN AUTHORS

A

Ackroyd, Peter R. 769, 801, 818
Albertz, Rainer 513, 655, 656, 799, 819
Andersen, Francis I. 521, 570, 597, 684, 691, 693

B

Ball, Ivan Jay, Jr. 757
Bartlett, John R. 1079
Barton, John 507
Batto, Bernard 515, 570, 639
Beck, Martin 507
Ben Zvi, Ehud 513, 597, 709, 757
Berlin, Adele 716, 734, 742, 755, 757
Berquist, Jon L. 755
Beuken, W. A. M. 769, 818, 819, 840, 987
Biddle, Mark E. 515, 570
Blenkinsopp, Joseph 639, 705, 806
Bloomhardt, Paul F. 794
Boadt, Lawrence 641, 693, 757
Bosshard-Nepustil, Erich 507, 820, 969, 996, 997,
998, 999–1000, 1007, 1031, 1079
Bruehler, Bart B. 861
Busink, Theodore A. 799

C

Conrad, Edgar 832

D

de Souza Philip 927, 985

E

Ego, Beate 504, 601
Elliger, Karl 728, 808, 819, 1031
Emmerson, Grace 801, 987, 1079
Eszenyei, Széles 693, 757

F

Fishbane, Michael 1017, 1024, 1031,
Fitzgerald, Aloysius 639
Floyd, Michael H. 627, 755, 801, 819, 844, 968
Freedman, David Noel 521, 570, 597
Fuller, Russell Earl 505

G

Gerstenberger, Erhard 639
Glazier–McDonald, Beth 1031, 1034, 1045, 1054,
1078, 1079
Grabbe, Lester L. 755, 809, 819
Gunneweg, Antonius H. J. 1026, 1078

H

Haak, Robert D. 693, 730, 742
Hagstrom, David Gerald 597
Hanson, Paul 808, 819, 957
Hatton, Howard A. 693
Hiebert, Theodore 691, 693
Hildebrand, David R. 801
Hill, Andrew E. 1038, 1045, 1050, 1070, 1076, 1078
Hillers, Delbert R. 597
House, Paul R. 507, 757
Huddleston, John R. 639

J

Jacobs, Mignon R. 597
Japhet, Sara 801
Jeremias, Jörg 511, 521, 522, 787, 1050
Jones, Barry Alan 505, 507

K

Kaminsky, Joel S. 1013, 1014, 1015, 1016, 1044
Kapelrud, Arvid S. 728
Kautzsch, E. 570, 621, 639, 728
Kessler, John 801

King, Philip J. 597

Kratz, Reinhard Gregor 705, 969, 996–1000, 1007,
1031, 1079

Krinetzki, Günter 728

L

Laato, Antti 861

M

Maier, Christl M. 515, 570

Maier, Walter Arthur 641

March, W. Eugene 639

Mason, Rex 597, 641, 693, 757, 769, 801, 819, 820,
968, 969, 987

May, Herbert Gordon 801

McComiskey, Thomas Edward 801

McKane, William 597

Meyers, Carol L. and Eric M. 801, 808, 809, 818, 819,
820, 865, 904, 906, 910, 914, 917, 918, 919, 920,
927, 929, 941, 947, 953, 957, 960, 968, 969, 970,
972, 974, 984, 985, 987, 1026, 1031

O

O'Brien, Julia 626, 627, 1026, 1031, 1035, 1049, 1050

Ogden, Graham 1079

Otto Plöger 819

P

Petersen, David L. 548, 681, 787, 791, 794, 802, 819,
820, 849, 851, 854, 857, 864, 865, 867, 878, 883,
904, 913, 914, 929, 941, 957, 961, 968, 969–70,
984, 987, 1024, 1031, 1034, 1036, 1038, 1045,
1049–50, 1054, 1056, 1070, 1078, 1079

Pierce, Ronald 769, 802, 1079

Pritchard, James B. 572, 693, 742

R

Redditt, Paul L. xvi, 755, 802, 819, 820, 840, 941,
957, 968, 984

Roberts, J. J. M. 627, 641, 677, 693, 742, 757, 797,
884, 892

Robertson, O. Palmer 627, 641, 673, 677, 678, 693,
757

Rose, Wolter H. 802

Roth, Marin 507

Rudolph, Wilhelm 570, 618, 669, 673, 675, 678, 693,
728, 742, 1068, 1069, 1078

Runions, Erin 597

S

Sabin, Philip 927, 985

Schart, Aaron xvi, 505, 507, 513, 555, 574, 621, 738,
820, 914, 978

Schmid, Konrad 596, 704, 705, 742

Schmitt, John J. 639

Schwesig Paul–Gerhard 507

Scoralick, Ruth 508

Sellin, Ernst 778

Seybold, Klaus 627, 656, 693

Shaw, Charles S. 597

Smith, Ralph L. 627, 791, 794, 865, 957, 987, 1079

Spronk, Klaas 641

Steck, O. H. xv, 505, 755, 820, 969

Stuhlmüller, Carroll 802

Sweeney, Marvin 505, 507, 508, 536, 540, 597, 640,
641, 646, 669, 673, 675, 678, 693, 719, 720, 728,
733, 742, 757, 790, 820, 849, 851, 865, 883, 884,
891, 901, 987

T

Tollington, Janet E. 802

U

Utzsneider, Helmut 555, 1079

V

Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. 508, 611

Vawter, Bruce 597

Verhoef, Pieter A. 794, 802, 1038, 1045, 1049, 1050,
1078, 1079

Vlaardingerbroek, Johannes 757

W

Watts, John 1016

Wilson, Gerald Henry 656, 748

Wilson, Kevin A. 733

Wöhrle, Jakob 508, 513, 709, 738, 819, 820, 899, 978,
996–97, 998, 999, 1000, 1007, 1031

Wolfe, Rolland Emerson 508

Wolff, Hans Walter 534, 536, 538, 540, 545, 552, 555,
570, 597, 769, 791, 794, 802, 818

Z

Zenger, Erich 508

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR THE INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

EXODUS

34:6-7 502
34:6 502
34:7 502

DEUTERONOMY

28:51 500

RUTH

1:1 492

2 KINGS

18-20 498
21:2, 10-12,
20-23 493
24:15 495
24:18-25:21,
27-30 498

NEHEMIAH

9:4 497
9:6, 7-8,
9-23, 24-25,
26-31, 33 497
9:32 497

JEREMIAH

1:2 498
52:1-30 498
52:31-34 498

HOSEA

1:1 493
2 500
2:8 500
2:12-17 501
2:16-20 500

2:18-19 501,
509,
510, 512

2:20, 25 501
2:21-23 500
14:4-7 501
14:6 500
14:7 500

JOEL

2:1-11, 12-17 499
2:13-14 502
2:17, 19 503
2:18-25 501
3 499
3:1-21 499
3:16, 18 496
3:19-21 502

AMOS

1:1 493
1:2 496
4:6-12 501
4:9 501
9 496
9:13-15 501
9:13 496

JONAH

4:2 503

MICAH

1:1 493
1:2-7 501
3:12 490
6:15 501
6:16 503

7 495, 499
7:18-20 502

NAHUM

1:3 502
3:15-17 501

HABBUKUK

1:9 501
3 499
3:17 501

ZEPHANIAH

1-2 498
1:1-18 500
1:1 493
3 498
3:18 503

HAGGAI

2:17-19 501

ZECHARIAH

1-8 493,
494, 501
1:2-6 502
1:14-17 502
8 496
8:9-12 502
9-14 496, 502
9-11; 12-14 502
14 499, 500

MALACHI

3 500
3:10-11 501
3:11 501

3:13-15 503
3:16-18 497
3:19-21 503

SIRACH

44-49 490
48:17-22 490
49:1-3 490
49:6-7 490
49:8 490
49:10 490

4 EZRA

14 490

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR MICAH

GENESIS

12-25 591
28:13-15 591
35:10-12 591
49:2 557

EXODUS

1-15 572
20:1-2 532
34:6-7 544, 591

NUMBERS

22-24 572
24:14 557
25:1 572

DEUTERONOMY

4:30 557
16:21-22 568
28:10 590
30:19 572
31:2-6 590

JOSHUA

2:1 572
2:9, 24 520, 590
3:10 520
5:1 520
5:9 573
9:1 520
9:24 520
10:6-11 520
11:3 520
14-15 538
18-20 538

JUDGES

9:52 588
15:14 588

1 SAMUEL

22:1 528, 530

2 SAMUEL

5:1-3 562
5:2 562
12:1-10 549

1 KINGS

15:13 568
16:16-28 577
16:25-26 580
16:25 577
16:26-22:40 577
16:30-31 580
16:31 577
22:41 577

2 KINGS

10:1-30 577
17 512, 530, 532
17:7-20 512
17:7-13 532
17:19 512
18-20 559
18-19 561
18:3-4 568
20:20 588
21:6, 13 577
21:9 577
23:6, 14, 15 568

2 CHRONICLES

32:1-5 588

EZRA

9:9 587

NEHEMIAH

2:13 541

JOB

19:8 556

PSALMS

1 539
16:7 559
21:3 529
25:4, 9-10 556
27:11 556
32:8 559
44:10 541
60:12 541

PROVERBS

1:15 556
30:18-20, 21-23, 29-31 563

ISAIAH

1:8 529
2:2-5 556, 559
2:2-4 520, 521
3:24 530
7:14 563
10 587
10:32 529
14:24, 27 559
15:2 530

16:1 529
22:4 529
23:8-9 559
36-39 559
36-37 561
37:22 529
39:1-8 559
42:8 567
49:14-26 529
49:14 515
49:15-18 515
52:2 529
56:11 562
58:12 587
60-62 529
60:1-22 515
60:4 560

JEREMIAH

2-4 529
2:2-3 515
3:6-10 515
4:11 529
4:31 529
6:2, 23 529
6:26 529
8:11, 19, 21ff 529
8:19 567
9:6 529
12:10 562
14:17 529
23:1-2 562
26:12-24 551
26:18 520
27-29 547
27:1-22 547
28:1-17 547

29:24-31 547
 47:5 530
 48:37 530
 50:6 562

LAMENTATIONS

1:5 560

EZEKIEL

6:3 572
 7:18 530
 16:1-63 515
 16 529
 23 529
 27:3 530
 34:2-10 562
 36:1-7 572

HOSEA

1 527
 1:1 523
 2 524
 2:5, 12 527
 2:16-24 570
 4:1-6 524
 4:1 571, 572
 5:1-7 524
 5:1 572
 6:7-9 539
 6:6 573
 7:1-3 539
 10:3 538
 10:15 575
 11:2 567
 12:4 575
 12:6 574
 12:7 575

JOEL

1:1 556
 2:12-14 544
 2:13 591
 2:18-27 570
 3:9-10 560
 3:19-20 544

3:20-21 591
 4 519, 520

AMOS

1-2 563
 1:1 523
 1:2 524
 2:8 573
 3:1 545, 572
 3:2, 14 579
 3:14 575
 4:1 536,
 545, 572
 4:4 575
 5 535
 5:1 545, 572
 5:5-6 575
 5:7, 15, 24 546, 573
 5:11-20 537
 5:12 536
 5:13 512, 537
 5:15 546
 6:4-7 536
 6:6 573
 6:12 546, 573
 7:10-17 549
 8:1-3 579
 8:5 575
 9:11 587
 9:11, 13 519
 9:13 579

JONAH

2:3a 592
 4:2 544, 591

NAHUM

1:2-3 544
 1:15-2:2 594
 1:15 519, 579
 3:14-15 587

HABAKKUK

1:2 579
 1:2-4 579,
 580, 594

1:3-4 579
 2:1 579
 3 524
 3:16-18 565
 3:16, 18 578

ZEPHANIAH

1:8-9 579
 3:7 579
 3:14-20 515
 3:14-17 519
 3:14 529
 3:18-20 519, 558
 3:19 558

ZECHARIAH

1:12-17 515
 2:14 529
 3:10 557
 7:9 546
 9:9-13 515
 10:2-3 562
 11:15-17 562
 13:7-9 591
 14 519, 520

MALACHI

1:2 538
 3:13 539
 4:1 539
 4:4-6 591

MATTHEW

2:4-6 562
 2:6 562
 22:34-40 534

ROMANS

3:23 543

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR NAHUM

EXODUS

34:6-7 603,
606,
611, 639

NUMBERS

14:18 611

DEUTERONOMY

7:9-10 611

2 KINGS

21 605
22-23 605
23 611

2 CHRONICLES

16:8 630

NEHEMIAH

9:17, 31 611
9:32 607

PSALMS

86:15 611
119 610

PROVERBS

26:4, 5 615

ISAIAH

10 606
10:5-6 620
10:7-12 621
10:12-19 607
33:9 612
52:2 616

52:7 604,
616, 617
60-62 614
66:19 630

JEREMIAH

2:2, 17-19 614
46:11, 19 614
50:19 612
50:42 614
51:33 614

LAMENTATIONS

1 610
2 610
3 610
4 610

EZEKIEL

23 614

HOSEA

14 612
14:5-7 612

JOEL

1-2 603
1:4 634
1:4 603
2:25 603
2 611
2:1-11 624
2:12-14 603
2:12-13 606
2:13-14 611
3:18-19 606
3:19-20 611

3:21 639
4:19-20 603

AMOS

1:2 612
4 612
4:1 612
9:3 612
9:8a, b 615

JONAH

1:1 610
4:2 606,
611, 639

MICAH

1:2-4, 5-7 605
1:2-5 610
6-7 607
7 612
7:8-20 605
7:8-10 605,
614, 615
7:11-13 605
7:14 612
7:18-20 603,
606, 611

HABAKKUK

1:5-12 620
2 612
2:17 612
3 610
3:3-15 610
3:13-15 621
3:16 610

ZEPHANIAH

3:14-20 614

ZECHARIAH

2:3-11 614
9:9-10 614
10-11 612
10:10 612
11:1-2 612
11:1 612
11:2 612

JUBILEES

1:20 618
15:34 618

MARTYRDOM OF ISAIAH

1:9 618
2:4 618
3:11 618

2 CORINTHIANS

6:15 618

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR HABAKKUK

GENESIS

6:5-7, 11-13 675
15:6 670
27:37 663
45:7-8 663
46:3 663

EXODUS

2:14 663
2:15 684
3:1 684
24:12 668
32:15-16, 19 668
34:1, 4, 28-29 668
34:6-7 688, 689

NUMBERS

4:15, 47 658
11:1 658
12:1 684

DEUTERONOMY

28:21 684
31:27 669
33:2 682

JOSHUA

9:1-2 681
9:9-10 680

JUDGES

3:19 653
5:4-5 682

1 SAMUEL

14:30 669
21:5 669

22:3-5 681

2 SAMUEL

7:1-15 681

1 KINGS

1:5-9 681
8 681
11:14-20 684
12:1-24 681
22:7-23 681

2 KINGS

4:16 646
5:17 658
8:9 658
9:25 658
20:12-19 646
23:29-30 652
24:1-4 681

2 CHRONICLES

6 681
7:6 667
8:14 667
12:1-7 681
35:2 667
35:3 658
36:11-17 681

NEHEMIAH

8:11 653
12:9 667
13:15 658

PSALMS

1-89 648

1-41 681

4:3 659

4 681

5 681

6:4 659

7 681

8 681

9 681

12 681

13:1, 3 659

22 681

35:17 659

42-72 681

45 681

46 681

46:11 675

53 681

54 681

55 681

56 681

60 681

61 681

62:4 659

67 681

69 681

73-89 681

74:10 659

76 681

78:48 684

79:5 659

80 681

80:5 659

81 681

82:2 659

84 681

90-106 681

90:13 659

91:5-6 684

94:3 659

107-150 681

109 681

119:8 659

139 681

140 681

143 681

PROVERBS

4:17 668

9:2, 5 668

21:17 668

23:20, 30-31 668

31:1 658

31:4, 6 668

ISAIAH

11:9 672

13:1 658

15:1 658

17:1 658

19:1 658

21:1, 13 658

22:1 658

21:8 667

23:1 658

30:6 658

39:1-8 646

46:1, 2 658

51:17-23 673

JEREMIAH

11:18-12:6 659

15:10-21 659

17:14-18 659

17:21, 22, 24 658

18:18-23 659
 20:7-18 659
 23:9-40 681
 23:33, 34, 38 658
 25:15-26;
 51:7 673
 49:12 673
 51:58 672

LAMENTATIONS

4:21 673

EZEKIEL

2:1-5 681
 12:10 658
 23:31-34 673

HOSEA

2 685
 2:5, 8, 12 687
 2:22 687
 14:7 687

JOEL

1:4 653
 2:1-11 653
 2:7-9 653
 2:25 653

AMOS

1:2 682
 3:7 655
 6:1 653
 6:10 653
 6:14 653,
 660, 661
 8:3 653

OBADIAH

12 654
 16 673

MICAH

1:2-5 682
 7:1-7 689

7:1-6 659
 7:14 674

NAHUM

1:1 658
 1:4 674
 3 652, 689
 3:15-17 689

ZEPHANIAH

1-2 652
 1:1 665
 1:7-8 675
 1:7 653, 675

HAGGAI

1:11 687
 2:17-19 687

ZECHARIAH

1:2-6 687
 1:8-16 687
 2:6-12 675
 2:7 675
 2:13 653, 675
 8:9-12 687
 9:1 658
 12:1 658
 13:2-6 681

MALACHI

1:1 658
 1:2-4 673, 683

MATTHEW

10:16 691

ROMANS

1:17 670

GALATIANS

3:11 670

HEBREWS

10:38 670

11:4 670

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR ZEPHANIAH

GENESIS

1–11	699, 702, 704, 708, 739, 743, 744
1	706, 713
2–4	705
2:13	744
10	704, 705, 734
10:1-7, 20, 22-23, 31-32	705
10:2	734
10:5-12	743
10:5-11	701, 702, 705, 734, 739, 744
10:5	734
10:6-8	744
10:7	734
10:8	734
10:8-19, 21, 24-30	705
10:10	735
10:11	734, 735
11	743, 744
11:1-9	704, 705, 739, 744
11:1, 6, 7, 9	744
11:8-9	744
12:1-3	705
18–19	733
50:25	722

EXODUS

13:19	722
-------	-----

LEVITICUS

20:5, 21	716
20:2-4	716

NUMBERS

12:1	734
19:16	734

DEUTERONOMY

28	721
28:1-14	721
28:30, 38-42	721

JOSHUA

24:32	722
-------	-----

1 SAMUEL

5:4-5	719
17:52	734

2 SAMUEL

12:30	716
-------	-----

1 KINGS

11:5	716
11:33	716

2 KINGS

17:16-17	716
17:16	715
20–23	698
21	716
21:1-9	717
21:3-6	716

21:3	715
21:10-15	716, 717, 727
22–23	716
22:3	717
22:14-17	716, 717
22:14	719
23	700, 717, 719
23:1-27	717
23:4-10	716
23:5	715
23:13	716
23:31-35	698
24:1	698
24:7	698
24:12-13	698
25:22-26	745

EZRA

3:12	754
------	-----

NEHEMIAH

3:3	719
12:39	719

JOB

38:7	715
------	-----

ISAIAH

10:5-11, 12-14	735
10:14-19	735
13:6	718
14:13	715
23:8-9	720
49:8-13	752
49:14-23	752

49:14	752
49:16-18	752
49:20	752
49:21	752
49:22-23	752

JEREMIAH

6:4	718
19:3	716
19:13	715
25:33	734
27:3-7	732
32:29-35	716
41:1–43:13	745
41:14-15	732

LAMENTATIONS

4:9	734
-----	-----

EZEKIEL

16:29	720
17:4	720
21:18-23	732
30:3	718
32:26	734

DANIEL

8:9-11	715
--------	-----

HOSEA

1:1	700, 712
2:1-5	752
2:7	714
2:9, 12	721
2:15, 22	721
2:19	726
3:4	737

3:5 715
 4:4, 6, 9 737
 4:5 737
 5:1 737
 5:6, 15 715
 5:10 737
 6:5 737
 6:9 737
 7:2, 5, 16 737
 7:7 737
 8:10 737
 8:14 722
 9:7 737
 9:15 737
 10:12 715
 12:6 726, 728
 12:8 720
 12:11, 14 737
 13:3 724
 13:10 737

JOEL

1:9, 13 737
 1:15 718
 2:12-17 738
 2:12-14 724
 2:17 737
 2:18 738
 3:9 718
 4:14 718

AMOS

1-2 722
 1:2 713
 1:3-2:16 701, 702
 1:6-8 730
 1:15 737
 2:3 737
 2:11 737
 3:7 737
 3:11 722
 5:4-6, 14 715
 5:7, 15, 24 726
 5:11 707, 721
 5:14-15 724

5:15, 25 728
 6:12 726
 7:10 737
 7:14 737
 8:3 717
 8:12 715
 9:7-10, 11-15 707

OBADIAH

15 718

MICAH

2:12 747
 3:1, 8-9 726
 3:5-6, 11 737
 3:11 737
 4-7 707
 4-5 707
 4:3, 14 737
 4:6-7 704, 707, 749, 750
 4:6 750
 4:7 750
 4:9-10 707
 4:11-13 707
 5:5 697
 5:7-9 707
 6:6-8 728
 6:7 716
 6:8 715, 726
 6:10-16 721
 7:3 726, 737
 7:8-10 752
 7:8-9 707

NAHUM

1:2 738
 1:6 738
 3:13 738

HABAKKUK

1:1 737
 2:3 738
 2:5 738

2:6-20 702
 2:20 717
 3:1 737
 3:7 734

HAGGAI

1:1, 3, 12 737
 1:1, 12, 14 737
 1:2-4 749, 751
 2:1, 10 737
 2:2, 4, 11 737
 2:17, 19 721

ZECHARIAH

1-8 704, 725
 1:1, 4 737
 1:2-6 738
 1:12-17 738, 752
 3:1, 8 737
 6:11, 13 737
 7-8 749
 7:1-3 749
 7:3 749
 7:3, 5 737
 7:3, 7, 12 737
 7:9 737
 8:9 737
 8:12 721
 8:18 749
 8:16 737
 9-14 725
 9:9-13 752
 13:2, 4 737
 14:21 720

MALACHI

1:6 737
 2:1, 7 737
 3:10-12 721
 3:23 737

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR HAGGAI

EXODUS

34:6-7 776

LEVITICUS

5:2-3 789

DEUTERONOMY

27-28 767

28:15-18 776

JOSHUA

1:6, 7, 9 782

1 KINGS

6:9 775

7:3, 7 775

8:66 795

2 KINGS

18-20 765

24:8-16 762

25:27-30 762

1 CHRONICLES

3:17-19 774

2 CHRONICLES

30-32 765

EZRA

1-6 762

3:8-10 762

3:10-13 786

3:10-11 789

3:11-13 780, 782

5:14-16 766

5:16 790, 762

PSALMS

78:70 795

ISAIAH

11:6-9 797

36-39 765

37:35 795

40 765

43:14-19 782

44:3 783

44:28 765

45:1 765

51:16 772

59:21 783

JEREMIAH

22:14 775

22:24 795

25:9 795

29:10 797

37:2, 17 772

50:1 772

EZEKIEL

14:9 772

26:7-14 797

36:27 783

37-45 797

37:14 783

39:29 783

HOSEA

3:4 797

9 795

JOEL

1:1 774

1:4 793

2:13-14 776

2:14 792

2:14, 19 793

2:25 793

3:1-21 798

3:19-20 776

4:1-2 783

AMOS

1:2 783

3:9 797

4:9 791, 793

9:11-15 798

9:14-15 793

JONAH

3:9 797

4:2 776

MICAH

1:2-7 783

7:18-20 776

NAHUM

1:2-3 776

1:5 783

3:15 793

HABAKKUK

3:16-19 798

3:17 793

ZEPHANIAH

1:1 764, 775

3:14-20 798

3:18-20 765,
774, 775

3:19-20 775

ZECHARIAH

1-8 763,
764,
766, 772

1:1, 7 762,
764, 772

1:2-6 766

1:6 793

3:1-10; 6:11 774

4:1-5 774

4:6-10 774

4:9 789

7:1 762,
764,
768, 772

7:7, 12 772

8 777

8:12 793

8:9-12 766,
768,
777, 791

9-14 764

11 779

14 798

MALACHI

1:1 772

3:5 798

3:8-12 766

3:11 793

3:16-18 766

WISDOM OF SOLOMON

10:10 799

SIRACH

47:22 798

2 ESDRAS

12:32 798

MATTHEW

1:12-13 798

LUKE

3:27 798

REVELATION

20:4–22:5 797

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR ZECHARIAH

GENESIS

1-2	945
1	975, 976
1:1	894
1:5	975
1:26-28	870
2:10-14	976
10:10	871
11:2	871
12:3	896
14:1, 9	871
26:28	864

EXODUS

2:22	954
3:5	842
4:16	949
9:13	978
10:5	870
15	921
18:3	954
21:32	934
22:1-3	864
24:17	839
28:11	834
28:36-38	849
28:36	849
29:6	847

LEVITICUS

5:1	864
8:9	847
11:19	871
13:55	870
23:39-43	980

NUMBERS

5:21-28	864
14:22	839
14:37	978
17:13-15	978
22:22, 32	846

DEUTERONOMY

5:11	977
6:13	977
10:8, 20	977
12	842, 962
12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26	842
12:5, 11, 21	962, 977
13:1-5	961
14:18	871
14:23	962, 977
16:2, 6, 11	962, 977
18:5	962
18:5, 7, 19, 22	977
18:15-20	961
18:18-22	962
18:21-22	961
21:5	962, 977
25:6	977
26:2	962, 977
26:15	842
28	947
28:10, 58	977
28:28	947
28:37	841
28:39	849
32:3	977

JOSHUA

5:15	842
------	-----

JUDGES

3:19	842
9	922
17:2	864

1 SAMUEL

2:1, 10	833
7-9	976
13:19	834
29:4	846

2 SAMUEL

5:6-10	906
5:11	833, 834
15:30-32	973
19:23	846
22:3	833
24:1	846

1 KINGS

3:6	894
5:18	846
7:21	875
8	842
8:16, 44, 48	962
9:7	841
11:7-8	973
11:14	846
11:23	846
11:25	846
11:36	962
14:21	962
15:18-20	951
18	961
18:25	962
18:28	964
20:1-34	951

22	966
----	-----

2 KINGS

5:18	951
7:8	978
11:14-22	951
12:12	833
21:7	962
22:6	833
23:27	962
23:29-30	951
23:29	951
25:1	887
25:3-4	887
25:8	887
25:25	887

1 CHRONICLES

3:19	953
6:1, 16-20	954
6:20-31	954
14:11	834
16:31	954
21:1	846
23:18	953

2 CHRONICLES

3:17	875
6:5-6, 34, 38	962
7:16	962
11:20	953
12:13	962
33:7	962
34:11	834
35:25	954

EZRA

1	806
1:7	806
1:8, 11	953
2	806
2:2	953
3	806
3:1-2	806
3:2, 8	953
3:4	979, 980
3:10-13	856
4	839
4:2-3	953
5-6	805
5:2	953
5:14, 16	953
8:2	953
8:3, 5	953
8:10	953
9	899
9:8-9	918
10:2	953
10:22, 27	953
10:28	953

NEHEMIAH

1:9	962
3:8, 30	953
3:10	953
3:29	953
4	839
5	933
6:18	953
7:2	953
7:7	953
8:9-12	919
8:11	842
8:13-18	979, 980
10:4	953
10:23	953
12:1, 47	953
12:2	953
12:3	953
12:4, 16	824
12:12, 41	953

12:41 953

ESTHER

1 919

JOB

1-2 950
 16:15 833
 29:14 847
 34:21 857

PSALMS

2 949
 2:7 949
 14:2 857
 26:8 839
 63:2 839
 66:7 857
 68:5 842
 75:11 833
 102:16 839
 113:5-6 857
 118:22 918
 132:17 833

PROVERBS

15:3 857

ECCLESIASTES

10:19 919

ISAIAH

1-2 969
 1:7-9, 24-28 969
 2:1-4 899, 969
 3:23 847
 3:26 864
 6:2-7 838
 10 835
 11:1 848
 11:9 892
 11:11 871
 13-23 899
 14:9 917
 14:31 877

22:23-25 918

27:13 892

43:6 877, 878

44:9-20 961

48:1 894

49:6 899

49:12 878

56:1-7 899

56:6-7 899

56:7 892

57:13 892

60:4 893

62:1-2, 10-12 899

62:3 847

65:11, 25 892

66 969

66:1-2 841

66:1 972

66:18-24 841

66:20 892

66:22-23 899

JEREMIAH

1:14-15 877

3:12, 14, 22 825

3:18 878

4:2 894

6:1, 22 877

7:10 962

9:17-26 954

14:13-14 961

15:12 877

16:15 878

23:5 848

23:8 878

23:13 961

24:6 857

25:10-11 830, 889

25:11-12 888

25:15 945

25:26 877

25:30 842

28 961

28:1 967

28:2, 10, 12 967

29:10-11 830

29:10 830,
888, 889

30:10-11 893

31:8 878

32:19 857

33:14 830, 889

33:15 881

39:1 887

39:2 887

41:1-2 887

46-51 899

49:10-12 861

46:20, 24 877

49:31 977

50 835

50:8 917

52:4 887

52:6-7 887

52:12 887

LAMENTATIONS

2:3 833

EZEKIEL

5 964

5:11 857

7:4, 9 857

8:18 857

9:10 857

11:4-17 965

11:22-23 839

11:23 892, 973

14:6 825

16 909

17 921

18:30 825

20:17 857

21:2 877

25-32 899

26:7 877

28:26 977

29:21 833

32:16 954

33:11 825

38:6	877	3:17	892	6:6-8	900	MALACHI	
39:2	877	3:17, 21	841	6:15	858	1:1	904,
40:20	877	4:18	975	7:10	918		945, 950
43:2-4	839					1:8-9	886
47:12	975	AMOS		NAHUM		1:9-10, 12-13	899
		1-2	905	3:14	918	1:11, 14	899, 978
DANIEL		1:1	974			2:17	857
1:2	871	1:3-2:3	899	HABAKKUK		3	816
		1:4	951	1:5-11	835	3:1	965, 966
HOSEA		2:4-5	835	2:20	842	3:2-3	965
1-3	891	2:7	835	3:17	858	3:6-12	826
1:1	824, 924	3:14	886			3:7	825
1:7, 11	918	4:4-5	900	ZEPHANIAH		3:13-21	814
1:11	912	4:4	886	1:1	880	3:16-18	926
2	816,	4:6-11	825, 826	1:2-3	945	4:1-5	815
	841, 921	4:7-9	895	1:7	842		
2:8-9	895	4:9	858	1:13	895	MATTHEW	
2:15-23	961	5:5, 6	886	2:4-15	899	21:1	973
2:16	966	5:11	895	2:13	877	21:2-7	908
2:17	961	6:10	842	3:11	892	21:2, 4-5	908
2:18	965, 966	7:7-9	837	3:14-20	841	24:3-8	973
2:21-23	965	7:10, 13	886	3:19-20	893	25:31-46	983
2:23	965	7:12	935, 963			25:32	835
7-14	920	7:14	962,	HAGGAI		26:30-31	973
7:11	920		963, 964	1:1	823,	27:3-5	935
9:1-4	919	8	890		846, 950	27:9	935
9:1, 4	919	8:3	842	1:1, 12, 14	953		
9:3, 6	920	9:8	857	1:1, 15	806, 823	MARK	
11:5, 11	920	9:11-15	918	1:6	895	11:1	973
12:1	920	9:11-12	841,	2:1	825	13:3-8	973
14:1-9	826		912, 924	2:1, 10, 18,		14:26-27	973
14:2-3	825	9:12	962	20	806		
14:3	920			2:1, 10, 20	823	LUKE	
14:6	858	OBADIAH		2:2, 4, 21, 23	953	19:9	973
		9-15	835	2:2-5	856	22:39-40	973
JOEL		16	892, 945	2:7	841		
1-2	895	18-21	918	2:10, 18, 20	823	JOHN	
2:1	892			2:10-23	825	10:11	940
2:12-14	826	MICAH		2:10-19	811	12:14-15	908
2:12-13	825	1:2-7	924	2:15-19	895	19:37	950
2:12	889	1:11	972	2:18-19	893		
2:17	841	4:2-4	899	2:19	858	REVELATION	
2:18	894	4:4	849, 895	2:20-23	882,	1:7	950
3:1-21	905	4:9-12	841		912, 953	16:14	951
3:4-8, 9-17	899	5:2-4	924	2:22	918	16:16	951
3:9-13	835	5:2-3	912				

INDEX OF SCRIPTURES FOR MALACHI

GENESIS

1	1038
1:6	1065
1:7	1058
2	1038
2:21-24	1038
2:24	1038
5:21-24	1067
16	1014
16:7-14	1049
21:17-21	1049
21:9	1014
22:1-18	1049
32:9-12	1014
34	1064
45:4-7	1014
50:18-20	1014
50:19-20	1014

EXODUS

3:2-22	1049
20:3-5	1043
20:7	1061
23:20	1050
24:4-7	1063, 1064
29:14	1024
32	1043
34:6-7	1063, 1074

LEVITICUS

4:11	1024
8:17	1024
16:27	1024
20:25	1065
21:13-14	1039

22:17-25	1019
22:22	1020

NUMBERS

6:23-27	1017, 1024
6:24-27	1017
8:5-22	1025
11:16-25	1076
19:5	1024
22:18	1068
30:9-10	1039

DEUTERONOMY

6:16	1058
7:1-4	993
12:12, 18-19	1025
14:27-29	1025
15:21	1020
17:8	1065
21:14	1039
24:1-5	1039
24:1	1062, 1063
28	1050
30:16-18	1043
32:6	1033
34	1068
34:5	1068

JOSHUA

1	1006
1:2	1068
1:7	1068

JUDGES

6:36-40	1056
---------	------

1 SAMUEL

2:33	1035
24:16	1064

1 KINGS

14:10	1035
21:21	1035

2 KINGS

2:9-18	1068
9:8	1035
17	1044
17:7-20	1043
17:7-18	1043
25	1044

1 CHRONICLES

9:31-32	1025
9:33	1025

2 CHRONICLES

36:15-16	1050
36:15	1027

EZRA

2:62	1019
3:1-7	1018
5:1	991
6:14	991
8:7-8	1064
9:1	993
9-10	993
10	1039
10:10	993
10:11	993
10:12	993

NEHEMIAH

7:64	1019
8	1064
8:1	1064
9-10	993
9	1073, 1074
9:3	1073
9:4-5	1073
9:6-23	1073
9:24-25	1074
9:26-31	1074
13:10-12	1056
13:14	1063
13:23-27	993

ESTHER

6:1	1062
-----	------

JOB

1-2	1033
-----	------

PSALMS

22:1	1048
69:28	1063
69:29	1063
89:49	1048
139:16	1063

ISAIAH

1:25	1051
4:3	1063
7:10-12	1056
34:5-17	1013
44:26	1027
59:3	1019
63:1-7	1013

63:11 1053

JEREMIAH

1-3 1037

2:22 1051

3:1 1034

3:7-10 1034

3:7, 10 1034

7:16-20 1035

7:16-18 1035

7:18 1034

31:29 1050

33:19-22 1024,
1025

44:15-25 1035

44:17, 18,
19, 25 1034,
1035

49:8, 10 1012

50:42 1033

LAMENTATIONS

4:14 1019

EZEKIEL

1:16 1038

8:14 1034,
1035

18:3 1050

40:46 1025

43:19 1025

44:15 1025

DANIEL

7:10 1063

HOSEA2 1036,
1041

14:9 1063

14:10 1070

JOEL1-2 1001,
1058

1:8 1037

2:1-11 1054

2:11 1002,
10492:12-14 1054,
1063

2:14 1058

2:17 1037,
1048,
1058

2:31 1069

3:2 1076

3:3-4 1076

3:4 1076

3:21 1063

4:1-3 1076

4:8 1010

AMOS

4 1054

4:6-12 1054

5:14-15 1048

9:11 1053

OBADIAH

1-5 1012

1 1027

3-4 1012

3 1012

8 1012

MICAH

1 1050

1:2 1050

5:1 1053

6:4 1068

6:9-16 1048

7:14, 20 1053

7:18-20 1063

NAHUM

1:2-3 1063

HABAKKUK

1:2-4 1048

ZEPHANIAH

3:4 1034

HAGGAI

1:1, 3 1009

1:1, 14 992

1:13 1027,
1050

2:1 1009

2:2, 21 992

2:21 1076

ZECHARIAH1-8 991,
1010,
10541:2-6 1054,
10561:6 1053,
1056

1:9 1050

4:4, 5, 13 1050

4:10, 12 1010

7-8 1020

7:2 1020

7:7, 10 1010

8 1020

8:9-12 1054,
1056

8:12 1056

8:21-22 1020

9-11 1010

9:1 1009,
1010

11:6 1010

12-14 1010

12:1-9 1076

12:1 1009,
1010

12:10 1076

13:1 1076

13:7-9 1002

13:9 1076

14 992

SIRACH

48:10 1068

JUBILEES

23:32 1064

30:21 1064

MATTHEW

5:23-24 1030

5:31-32 1039

17:1-8 1077

MARK

9:2-8 1077

10:2-10 1039

12:38-40 1029

12:41-44 1029

LUKE

9:28-36 1077

20:45-47 1029

21:1-4 1029

INDEX OF SIDEBARS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Text Sidebars

2 Kings 17:7-20	1043	Creation Story Allusions	975	Fertility of the Land	777
Accusing God;		Critique of Cult	573	Festival of Booths	980
Blaming Humans	533	Cult Prophets	681	Five Speeches	845
Alexander and Josephus	810	Cup in YHWH's Hand,		Former Prophets, The	825
"A Mean Kind of Justice"	638	(Hab 2:16), The	673	Former Prophets	889
Amos 6:14 and Habakkuk 1:6	661	Cushites in Zephaniah 2:12	734	Four Horns	833
Angels in the Ancient		Cycle of Violence	818	Four-part Pattern to	
Near East	832	Date Formulas	772	Zechariah's Visions	827
Angels/Messengers/Men	838	Date of Kings, The	512	Genealogy of Zechariah	824
Apocalyptic Expectations?	718	Dating the Source		Growth of Micah 4–5	555
Astral Deities	715	Material of Habakkuk	665	Habakkuk 2:13-14;	
Attitude toward		Dating the Temple		Isaiah 11:9; and	
Religious Leaders	849	Reconstruction	806	Jeremiah 51:58	672
Babylonian Chronicles	624	Dating the Vision Cycle	840	Habakkuk 2:17 and	
Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon	612	Davidides in Postexilic		Nahum 1:4	674
"Be Silent" in the Book of the		Biblical Texts	953	Habakkuk 2:20 and the	
Twelve	842	Day Formulas in		Book of the Twelve	675
Belial as the Evil One	618	Zephaniah 1:7-10	719	Habakkuk 3 and Cultic	
Biblical Case Study, A	967	Deities and Treaties	572	Transmission	681
Blessing vs. Prosperity Gospel	794	Denouncing Prophets	961	Habakkuk 3:17 and the	
Books of Instruction	1064	Deuteronomistic History	532	Book of the Twelve	687
Books Set in the		Diadochoi	808	Habakkuk and Daniel	647
Postexilic Period	764	Differences between		Habakkuk in Jewish Tradition	646
Bosshard and Kratz	997	Zechariah 9:1; 12:1;		Haggai 2:17 and Amos 4:9	791
Branch	881	Malachi 1:1	904	Haggai in Jewish Tradition	761
Casting Lots in Micah 2:5	538	Different Visions in		Harmonizing Accounts of	
Changing Theological		Ezra 3:10-13	786	Temple Reconstruction	762
Perspectives	714	Dimensions of the Scroll	864	Heavenly Books	1063
Chiastic Structure		Directions	877	Heavenly Court	847
of 3:14-17, The	748	Divorce in the Pentateuch	1039	Henotheism	733
Chronological Formula, The	557	Earthquake in the Days of		Hezekiah and Josiah	727
Chronological Structure of		Uzziah, The	974	Hezekiah to Josiah	605
Zechariah 8:9-12	894	Economy at the Time of Micah	536	High Places Made Low	526
Colors of the Horses	829	Emeth and Aslan	984	Hosea, Amos, Micah, and	
Conflict between Prophets	547	Ephah	870	Zephaniah	513
Content of the		Exilic Fast Days	887	Identifying the Lord (<i>'ādôn</i>)	1050
Covenant, The	1050	Exogamy and Nehemiah	993	Identity of the Messenger	1049
Cornerstone and Tent Peg	918	Eyes of YHWH, The	857	Imagery of the Two Mountains	876
		Fertility Images from Joel	793	Insertion of Malachi 3:16-18	1066

Interpreting Nahum 1:12	615	Micah 3:2 and Amos 5:15	546	Plunder and Tribute after Battles	979
Intertextuality and Habakkuk 2:4	670	Micah 4:6-7 and the Book of the Twelve	558	Poetic Depiction of Thebes's Allies	630
Introduction to the Flood Story	675	Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:6	562	Political Constellations and Dating	948
Jacob's Prayer	1014	Micah 5:5-6	564	Present Form of Haggai 2:5a, The	782
Jeremiah 22:24	796	Micah 7:10 and Nahum 3:14	587	Priestly and Yahwistic Material in Genesis 10	705
Jeremiah's Confessions	659	Micah 7:1-7 and the Book of the Twelve	579	Priestly Conflict	1026
Jerusalem as the Center of the World	841	Micah and Isaiah	559	Problems Dating Zechariah 9-14	920
Jerusalem Emphasis	576	Micah in Jewish Tradition	511	Professional Prophets	963
Jerusalem Personified	515	Midian and Cush	684	Prophet Nahum as a Scribal Creation, The	610
Josiah, Son of Zephaniah	880	Milcom	716	Prophetic Prediction	797
Judah in the Assyrian Period	593	More Colors of the Horses	876	Prophets and <i>Nebi'im</i>	1076
Justice and Kindness	573	Mount of Olives, The	973	Prophets, Priests, and Rulers	548
Justice vs. Greed	582	MT and LXX Orders	491	Protest Literature	665
Justice	546	Mystery of God's Action, The	1014	Queen of Heaven and Tammuz	1035
Kingdom of God	799	Nahum 1:3 and Exodus 34:6-7	603	Radical Changes on the Day of YHWH	974
Kings in Superscriptions	493	Nahum 1:15 (MT 2:1) Cites Isaiah 52:7	616	Reading Habakkuk in the Twelve	689
Lady Nineveh	614	Nahum 1:2b-3a and Exodus 34:6-7	611	Reading Haggai 1:2-6 in the Book of the Twelve	775
Lady Zion in Micah 1	529	Nahum 2 and 3	626	Reading Zephaniah 1:7-18 in Josiah's Time	717
Lady Zion in Zephaniah 3	752	Nahum in Jewish Tradition	601	Recurring Elements	878
Lampstand	854	Nahum's Early Structure	613	Recurring Introductory Markers	554
Language Associated with Moses and Joshua	842	Name Theology	962	Repeated "Time" Triplets	751
Leaders in the Book of the Twelve	737	Narrative Flow of Zechariah 11:4-17	930	"Repent" in the Modern World	826
Leningrad Codex	568	Narrative Movement of the Vision Report	853	Report	853
Levites	1025	Olive Tree, The	858	Returning to YHWH in the Book of the Twelve	1054
Literary Blocks of Zechariah	810	Omri and Ahab	577	Reversing Numbers 6:23-27 in Malachi 1:6-2:9	1017
LXX Translation of Haggai 2:16	790	Openness to the Nations	899	Rhetorical Logic of Habakkuk 3:8-15	685
Malachi 1:1	904	Oracle or Burden	658	Rhetorical Logic of Malachi 2:1-9	1023
Malachi 1:11-14 and the Didache	1030	Oracles and their Connections to their Respective Visions	879	Salvation Oracle	783
Malachi 4:4-6 and the End of the <i>Nebi'im</i>	1068	Order of Creation, The	713	"Satan, The"	846
Malachi and the Widow's Mite	1029	Original Content of the Vision of Habakkuk 2:2, The	669	Semi-acrostic Theophany	610
Malachi in Jewish Tradition	991	Overview of Nahum 3	627		
Megiddo	951	Scholarship	627		
Merism	894	Parallel of Isaiah 2:2-5 and Micah 4:1-5	556		
Messenger Formula	774	Partial Verses	606		
Messenger of YHWH, The	950	Pentateuch Sources: J and P	704		
Micah 2:3 and Amos 5:13	537	Persian Rulers	809		
Micah 3:12 and the Prophetic Context	549	Philo on Enoch, Moses, and Elijah	1069		

Seventy Years	830	Types of Curses	864	Zephaniah 3:19 and the Use of Micah 4:6-7	750
Shepherd as King	562	Use of Interrogatives in the Rhetorical Structure of Malachi 1:6-10, The	1019	Zephaniah 3:8 and the Book of the Twelve	738
Skipping the Exile in Isaiah and the Twelve	765	Use of Zechariah 12:10 in the New Testament, The	950	Zephaniah and Genesis 1-11	702
Speaker of Micah 7:1-7, The	578	Utopian Visions	754	Zephaniah and the Book of Four	700
Statement/Question/Response Schema	994	Views of Micah 2:5	536	Zephaniah in Jewish Tradition	697
Structure of Malachi 1:2-5	1011	Village Names and Word Plays	531	Zerubbabel in the Biblical Record	774
Structure of Zechariah 2:1-13, The	837	Wait on God and the Book of the Twelve	574	Zion Theology in Micah	559
Structure of Zechariah 8:16-17	897	Warrior YHWH, The	972	Zion Theology in Zechariah	892
Structure of Zephaniah	700	What Happens in Habakkuk 3:16?	687		
Synchronic and Diachronic	497	When Are the Days of Old?	1053	Illustrations	
Syntax of Nahum 3:15ba, The	633	“Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”	957	<i>American Progress</i> , John Gast (oil on canvas)	740
Tanak	996	Who Speaks in Micah 2:7a?	539	Ancient Manuscripts	680
<i>Teraphim</i>	916	Wöhrle’s Model	998	Asherah	567
Testing YHWH	1058	Woman	870	Ashurbanipal kills the lion (relief)	626
Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve	776	Word Event Formula	772	Assyrian and Babylonian Empires	514
Theophany in Prophetic Literature	524	Word Event Formulas and Messenger Formulas	885	Assyrian and Babylonian Empires	648
Three Stages of Nahum 3:14-17	634	Worship of Asherah at the Temple	568	Assyrian and Babylonian Empires (map)	648
Time Frame of the Latter Prophets, The	498	YHWH as King	748	Assyrian Empire (map)	602
“Tradent”	926	YHWH Worshipers among the Nations	1021	Assyrian Empire	602
Transfiguration, The	1077	YHWH’s Promise to Zion	586	Assyrian siege machine	530
Translating Malachi 2:12	1036	Zechariah 10:7-12 and Hosea 9:14	919	Assyrian warriors (relief)	530
Translating Malachi 2:15	1038	Zechariah 11:13 and Judas	935	Astarte figurines (terracotta)	916
Translating Malachi 3:16	1062	Zechariah 12:4 and Deuteronomy 28:28	947	Astral Deities	715
Translating Micah 2:8	540	Zechariah 13:9 and the Book of the Twelve	965	Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, The (map)	514
Translating Micah 5:3	563	Zechariah 14 and Isaiah	969	Behistun Inscription	773
Translating Micah 7:15	590	Zechariah 14:9 and Malachi 1:14	978	Bethel in Zechariah 7	886
Translating Nahum 3:15-16	632	Zechariah 9:9 and Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem	908	<i>Choir of Prophets</i> , Fra Angelico	496
Translating Zechariah 11:11	934	Zechariah in Jewish Tradition	805	<i>Choir of Prophets</i>	496
Translating Zechariah 11:17a	938	Zechariah 1:13b and Fertility of the Land	721	<i>Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem</i> , Hippolyte Flandrin	908
Translating Zechariah 11:7	932	Zephaniah 1:16b and Hosea 8:14	722	Cities and Towns in Micah 1:8-16 (map)	528
Translating Zechariah 12:1a	944	Zephaniah 1:4 in MT and LXX	714	Darius the Great (rock relief)	773
Translating Zechariah 5:3	865			Desmond Tutu	551
Translating Zechariah 5:6	870			Destruction of Lachish	530
Translating Zephaniah 2:2	724			<i>Divine Comedy</i> , The, Dante Alighieri	846
Translating Zephaniah 3:17	748				
Translation of Malachi 2:11	1034				
Translation of Zephaniah 3:10	745				
Two Themes in Zechariah 1:14-15	830				

Ebla Tablets	683	Nineveh (map)	625
Ebla Tablets, clay tablets	683	Nineveh's Destruction in	
Edomites and Nabateans	1012	Ancient Sources	625
Egyptian Mummy	1067	Oil lamps (terracotta)	854
<i>Entree d'Alexandre a Babylone,</i>		Places in Zechariah 9 (map)	905
Charles Le Brun	844	Priests and Levites,	
<i>Ezekiel and Zacharias,</i>		Friedrich Peypus	1027
Bonanno Pisano		Priests and Levites	1027
(bronze relief)	965	<i>Prophet Zechariah, The,</i>	
Ezekiel and Zechariah	965	Michelangelo	
Gate of the fortification of		(ceiling frescos)	812
Tel Dan	526	<i>Prophets Malachi and Balaam,</i>	
<i>Generosity versus Greed,</i> Francisco de		<i>The,</i> Bonanno Pisano	
Goya y Lucientes (brush and		(bronze relief)	1036
gray wash on laid		<i>Rebuilding of the Temple,</i>	
Netherlandish paper)	582	<i>The,</i> Paul Gustave Doré	
<i>Genesis</i> (colored woodcut)	1059	(engraving)	792
Gilead	589	Relief of Darius	823
<i>Goden in het luchtruim,</i>		Relief of Malachi and Balaam	1036
Jacob de Wit	835	Relief of Mourning Women	
<i>Good Shepherd, The,</i>		(limestone)	955
Bernhard Plockhorst	940	Relief of the King's Hunting	
Hadad	952	Scene	626
Hadad, basalt statue	952	Saint Catherine's Monastery,	
Haggai	767	Joonas Plaan	524
Highest Heaven (diagram)	1059	Second Temple	860
Imagining Angels	835	Shepherds in Art	940
Impression from a cylinder		Sites of Manuscript	
seal (pink jasper)	1067	Discoveries (map)	680
Jehu, King of Israel, basalt		Sun-god Shamash, <i>The</i>	876
bas-relief	1067	Swords into Plowshares	557
Jews praying at the Wailing		Temple Rebuilding	792
Wall, Bonfils (photograph)	767	Thebes's Allies (map)	630
Kadisha Valley, <i>The</i>	612	Tribute	784
King Ashurnazirpal hunting		Tribute (basalt bas-relief)	784
lions (relief)	626	Two winged protective spirits	567
<i>Let Us Beat Swords into</i>		Tyche (mosaic)	529
<i>Plowshares,</i> Evginiy		<i>Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, The,</i>	
Vuchetich (sculpture)	557	Gustav Bauernfeind	
Malachi Woodcut,		(oil on canvas)	860
Christoph Weigel	1003	Windows of Heaven	1059
Manifest Destiny	740	Winged Solar Disk	1067
Map of Places in Zechariah 9	905	Woman in the Ephah, <i>The</i>	872
Mediterranean Sea (map)	886	Women Mourners	955
Megiddo	951		
Michelangelo's Zechariah	812		
Morosheth-gath	536		
Mount of Olives, <i>The</i>	973		

INDEX OF TOPICS

A

Aaron 504–505, 507, 513, 555,
572, 574, 601, 621, 738, 820,
850, 914, 949, 978, 981,
1025–26, 1031, 1051–52
Abraham 497, 591, 594, 670, 697,
733, 850, 896, 1014, 1038
Accusations 499, 513, 515,
517–18, 522, 525, 532–33,
535–37, 545, 550, 567, 571,
574, 577, 580–81, 639, 647,
671, 689–90, 700, 715, 723,
726, 736, 746, 864, 926, 935,
960, 992, 995, 1018, 1023,
1034, 1036, 1041–42, 1044,
1049
Acrostic 603–604, 606, 610–11,
674
Adultery 639
Ahab 513, 517, 525, 576–77, 580
Ahaz 493, 511, 523, 527, 727,
1057
Alexander 808–10, 820, 844, 907,
910, 920, 925, 936, 948, 993
Ammon 702, 716, 732–33, 738
Amorites 680, 993
Ancestors 490, 496, 594, 607,
712, 778, 798, 824–25, 896,
1043–44, 1051, 1054–56, 1069,
1074, 1076
Angel 618, 646–47, 829–31,
833–34, 838, 845–48, 854, 857,
863, 869–70, 875–76, 950,
1027
Arabia 630, 684
Aram 904
Ashdod 593, 730, 742, 905–906
Asherah 567–68, 1034, 1036
Ashkelon 730, 742, 905–906
Assyria 494–95, 497, 499, 502,
513, 516, 520, 559, 564,

579–80, 586, 588–89, 592–95,
602–607, 609–11, 613–14,
616–21, 624–26, 629–33,
635–36, 638–39, 646, 648–49,
652–53, 659–62, 689, 697, 701,
703, 717, 727, 730, 732,
734–35, 738–39, 741, 784, 810,
833–34, 877, 919–21, 979,
1067, 1074, 1078

Astral Deities 715, 719

B

Baal 500, 524, 577, 685, 700, 714,
716, 921, 951, 961, 1034, 1043,
1069
Babylon 494–95, 498–99, 502,
513–14, 518, 520, 558–60, 563,
569, 579, 581, 588–89, 592–93,
605–606, 610, 614, 617,
620–21, 635, 645–63, 665–69,
671–73, 675–76, 681–83,
685–89, 698, 705, 712, 717–18,
725, 732, 735, 738–39, 744,
750, 762, 773, 776, 779, 796,
806, 809, 830, 833–35, 837,
839–40, 843–44, 861, 871, 877,
880, 883, 888, 892, 912, 1074
Babylonian 490, 497, 514, 516,
559–60, 562, 565, 581, 586,
605, 610, 620–21, 623–24,
646–653, 657–59, 661–62,
665–66, 668, 670–71, 673–76,
705, 723, 725, 731, 773, 843,
898, 917, 962, 1011
Balaam 572, 697, 846, 1036
Balak 572
Bashan 589–90, 612, 674, 921–23
Battle 494, 530, 540, 542, 587,
593, 608, 619, 623–26, 632–33,
635, 647, 652–53, 659, 680,
683–86, 698, 718, 722, 734,
738, 811, 813, 821, 841–42,
903, 907, 910–11, 916–19, 921,

923, 946–47, 950–52, 955–56,
970–72, 974, 977–79, 984,
1013, 1069–70

bayôm habûr 719–20, 747

Beasts 713, 736, 1063

Beersheva 833

Behistun Inscription 773

Bel and the Dragon 645–46

Belial 617–18

Bethel 567, 575, 811, 821,
885–88, 896–97, 919, 924, 935,
963

Bethlehem 561–62, 912

Blessing 557, 591, 767–69, 776,
783, 789, 791–94, 848–49, 864,
893, 895–96, 1017, 1024, 1034,
1058–60

Book of Four 493–94, 501, 513,
518, 607, 700, 706–707, 715

Book of Remembrance 499, 504,
766, 996, 1002, 1008, 1052,
1061–64, 1066, 1073

Book of the Twelve 489–505,
507–508, 513, 515, 518–20,
523, 526, 528, 535, 537, 539,
543–44, 546, 549, 553, 555,
558–59, 568–70, 574, 576–79,
585, 587, 591–94, 601–602,
604–607, 610–12, 614–16, 621,
623, 627, 635, 638–40, 645,
652–54, 659–60, 673–75, 680,
682–83, 685, 687–89, 699–700,
702, 705, 707, 709, 714–15,
717, 721, 725–26, 728, 737–40,
743, 749–50, 753, 755, 764–66,
769, 774–77, 779, 791–93, 796,
807, 813–16, 820, 825–26, 832,
842, 846, 849, 857–58, 880,
885–86, 889, 891–92, 894–95,
900, 904, 911–14, 918, 924–26,
936, 944, 946, 961, 964–66,
969, 975, 978, 995–98,
1000–1003, 1007, 1009–10,

1012, 1016, 1021, 1030,
1036–37, 1041–42, 1048,
1053–54, 1056, 1060, 1063,
1068, 1073–76, 1078

Burnt offerings 573

C

Call to Repentance 495, 500, 502,
811, 824, 890, 1053–54, 1056

Cambyases 762, 772–73, 809

Canon 489–92, 504–505, 507,
515, 549, 570, 591, 611, 637,
639, 808, 816, 912, 964, 969,
991, 996–98, 1006, 1008, 1025,
1042, 1044, 1060, 1067–68,
1070, 1074, 1076–77

Captives 661

Captivity 698, 731, 773

Carchemish 494, 593, 647, 652,
659, 698, 738–39

Carmel 507, 612, 674

Catchword Connections 492

Chaldeans 647, 659–61, 665

Chaos 524, 595, 679, 684–86,
688, 895, 921

Chronological Movement 494

Cities Personified 515, 752, 841

Compassion 497, 502–503,
543–44, 591, 594–95, 606,
610–11, 639, 752, 826, 831–32,
835, 837, 872, 899, 926, 930,
950, 955–56, 1055–56, 1058,
1063

Complaints 645, 649–51, 654,
658, 688

Covenant 500, 532, 562, 572–73,
594, 607, 721, 726, 778, 784,
817, 864, 866, 889, 896, 900,
909, 929, 932–33, 947, 961–62,
966, 993–94, 1004–1006, 1015,
1017, 1023–25, 1031, 1034,
1041–43, 1049–56, 1058,
1060–61, 1063–65, 1069, 1071,
1073–74, 1077

Creation 524, 572, 610, 612, 648,
654, 664–65, 672, 674, 677,
684, 700, 702, 704–06,
708–709, 712–713, 726, 728,
739, 743–44, 784, 816, 842,
944–45, 957, 975, 983, 1023,
1059, 1066, 1073

Cross 512, 577, 719, 740, 769,
782

Cult Prophets 680–81

Cultic Abuse 502, 815, 1003

Curse(s) 500, 547, 572, 697, 707,
721, 767, 776, 783, 849,
863–66, 870–71, 895, 933,
937–38, 947, 962, 978–80,
1001, 1004–1005, 1017,
1022–24, 1028, 1031, 1036,
1050, 1057–59, 1070

Cush 630, 684, 734–35, 744–45

Cyrus 498, 647, 725, 762, 765,
774, 805–806, 809, 840, 844,
1018

D

Damascus 618, 904, 952

Darius 725, 762, 765, 772–73,
796, 806, 809–11, 823, 828–29,
838, 880, 882

David 508, 512, 521, 528–31,
548–49, 559, 562, 570, 587,
597, 607, 639, 641, 646, 681,
693, 697, 727, 762, 786–87,
794–95, 798, 801–802, 819,
846, 848–51, 854, 857, 864–65,
867, 878, 881, 883, 892, 904,
906, 912–13, 929, 941, 949–50,
952–55, 957, 959–61, 968–69,
973, 984, 987, 1024, 1031,
1034, 1036, 1038, 1045,
1049–50, 1078–79

Davidic Kingdom 798, 912–13,
915, 918, 923–24, 936

Day of YHWH 499–500,
502–504, 516, 519–20, 537,
652, 654, 675, 683, 697,
699–701, 708–709, 711,
716–19, 721–24, 726–27, 739,
742, 813, 815–18, 822, 842,
903, 940, 945, 959, 964–66,
969–72, 974–75, 978–83, 991,
995–97, 999–1008, 1044,
1047–50, 1053–54, 1058–62,
1065–72, 1076, 1078

Deliverance 498–99, 501–502,
515, 537, 540–41, 543–44, 558,
560, 566, 572, 580, 589, 611,
655, 658–59, 687, 700, 807,
893, 903, 915, 936, 967, 978,
1005, 1076

Deuteronomistic History 512–13,
521, 526, 532, 568, 574, 591,
700, 714, 716, 778, 886, 976

Dew 565, 777

Diadochoi 808

Dialogue 539, 667, 752, 789, 811,
1011, 1013, 1056, 1075

Dirge 627

Disputation 503, 535, 538,
994–1002, 1004, 1009–13,
1015, 1017, 1021, 1023–24,
1029–30, 1033, 1044, 1047–48,
1050–51, 1053–55, 1059–61,
1066

Doxologies 944

Dreams 950

E

Earthquakes 973

Eden 976

Edom 496, 499, 502, 673,
682–84, 732, 738, 833, 835,
910, 1001, 1010–13, 1015,
1079

Egypt 494, 514, 524, 572,
588–90, 592–93, 602, 614,
629–31, 636, 639, 648, 652,
684, 698, 734, 738–39, 745,
782, 809, 819, 833, 907,
919–20, 980, 992, 1014, 1023,
1035, 1043

Egyptians 698, 715, 809, 912

Ekron 730, 742, 905–906

Elders 562

Elect 1014–15

Elijah 697, 798, 816, 991–92,
996, 1005–1007, 1048, 1050,
1067–70, 1076–78

Elisha 646, 1048

Elohim 682, 847

Ephraim 502, 724, 809–10, 813,
816–17, 822, 896, 903, 908–10,
915–16, 918–21, 923–25, 935,
944

Esau 496, 994, 1010–15, 1044

Eschatology 557, 750, 819, 841,
1005

Ethiopia 630, 684, 734–35,
744–45

Exile 497–98, 511–13, 516, 521,
529, 547, 558–62, 569, 586–87,
589–90, 593, 616, 624, 626,
631, 645, 647, 658, 665, 675,
681, 702, 705, 707, 721, 733,
745, 750, 755, 761, 765, 775,
782, 786, 808, 819, 830,
832–34, 878, 883, 885, 887–89,
894–95, 899–900, 917, 920,
971, 991

Exodus 497, 502, 508, 544, 576,
589, 591, 594, 603, 606, 611,
688, 742, 782–83, 816, 839,
842, 849, 864, 921, 934, 981,
1044, 1053, 1055, 1061, 1063,
1067, 1074

Exogamy 993, 1039

F

Faithfulness 591, 594, 926, 1014,
1031

Fast 574, 722, 749, 776, 887, 898,
900

Fathers 490, 504, 824, 994, 1035,
1055

Fertility 499–501, 557, 567, 576,
579, 612, 651, 687, 721, 764,
766–67, 777, 791–93, 798, 816,
849, 857–58, 894, 898, 911,
915, 951–52, 1004, 1036, 1041,
1054, 1056, 1058

Fertility of the Land 499–501,
576, 721, 766–67, 777, 791,
793, 816, 849, 857, 894, 898,
1054, 1058

Festival of Booths 979–80, 982

Festivals 616, 749, 900, 919, 980

Flood 532, 624–25, 675, 704,
713, 728, 743

Flood Story, The 675, 704, 713,
743

Former Prophets 489, 504, 532,
738, 824–25, 888–89, 996,
1006, 1044, 1067, 1074, 1076

G

Gath 528–29, 531, 730, 906

Gaza 730, 742, 905–906

Genealogy 493, 711–12, 824, 829

Gerizim 810, 925, 936

Gibeon 680

Gilead 589–90, 612, 920–21

Gilgal 572–73

Glory 528, 530–31, 539, 543,
569, 586, 672–73, 683, 748,
777, 781–82, 784, 839, 856,
892–93, 973, 1077

Gomorrah 733, 742

Good, The 546, 861

Grain 500–501, 687, 776–77,
790–91, 911, 915, 948, 965,
1023, 1025

Greece 734, 808–809, 903, 907,
909–10, 920, 935

Greed 517, 536–37, 542, 547,
549–50, 552, 574–75, 578–82,
650, 671–72, 677, 688–89, 691,
867, 930, 939

H

Haggai/Zechariah 1–8 493, 801,
806, 815, 818, 865, 878, 883

Hail 791, 1059

Hamath 905

Hananiah 547, 953, 961, 967

Harvest 577, 579, 793, 980

Hate 546–47, 724, 818, 897, 994,
1042

Heavenly beings 838

Heavenly Council 1033

Heavens 683, 768, 777, 783, 795,
835, 871, 878, 895, 945, 965,
972, 1059

Heldai 880–81

Hellenistic Period 555, 806–807,
810, 818, 908–909, 978, 1011,
1070

Henotheism 733

hesed 573–74, 580, 583, 591, 594,
1074

Hezekiah 490, 493–94, 498, 511,
523, 527–28, 549, 553–54,
558–59, 561–64, 568, 577,
585–86, 588, 605, 638, 646,
689, 697, 711–12, 726–27, 737,
742, 765

History 493, 497, 512–13, 516,
521, 526, 529, 532, 567–69,
574, 591–94, 605, 617, 620,

634–35, 639, 654–56, 665, 676,
679, 681, 686, 688, 697–98,
700, 709, 712, 714, 716–18,
725–26, 740–41, 745, 752–55,
764, 778, 797, 807, 819, 821,
831–32, 846, 876, 880, 886,
889, 900, 905, 912–13, 922,
927, 960, 976, 979–80, 983,
985, 996, 1015, 1025, 1033–34,
1040–42, 1044, 1074–75

Holiness 766–67, 769, 789, 793,
801, 866, 872–73, 980–81,
1034

Holy One 849

Holy War 977

Hope 490, 494, 499, 502,
513–18, 526, 537–38, 543–44,
559–60, 565, 569, 579, 581,
583, 592, 594–95, 606, 612,
617, 620, 634, 636–38, 654–55,
672, 677, 681, 698, 707, 718,
724–25, 727, 743, 750, 754–55,
766, 768–69, 795–98, 802,
811–12, 816, 819, 821–22, 832,
842, 860–61, 883, 892, 912–13,
916, 921, 924–27, 936, 953,
956, 959, 979–80, 983, 1001,
1007, 1024, 1054, 1070, 1075,
1077, 1079

hōy 535, 627–28, 669–70, 674,
730–31, 937

Hymn of the Fathers 490, 504

I

Idolatry 500, 517–18, 526, 532,
534, 567, 581, 651, 677, 689,
822, 960–61, 1001, 1033–34,
1038–39, 1041–44, 1055

Idols 517, 526–27, 532, 534, 566,
591, 674, 915, 960–63, 1043

Impurity 960, 1045

Infertility 500, 576–77, 653–54,
721, 749, 766, 1003–1004,
1054

Infidelity 891, 1003, 1008,
1033–34, 1037, 1039–43, 1055

Iniquity 518, 850, 869–71,
1026–27

Injustice 534, 551, 578–80, 594,
621, 653–54, 658, 671–72,
676–77, 689, 691, 728, 843,
1026

Integrity 543, 603, 677, 848, 901,
959, 1024, 1027, 1040, 1057

Intercession 522, 585, 589, 593,
831

Irony 560, 675, 735, 773, 775,
947, 964

J

Jacob 496, 525, 540, 545–46, 548,
554, 556, 565, 567, 591, 594,
618, 697, 835, 886, 994, 1007,
1010–11, 1014–16, 1031, 1034,
1036, 1044, 1051, 1054, 1068

Japheth 706, 734, 743

Jebusites 906, 993

Jedaiah 880–81

Jehoiachin 498, 512, 562, 564,
698, 725, 762, 765, 773, 796,
882, 912

Jehoiakim 521, 549, 564, 698, 796

Jeremiah 489–90, 496–98, 504,
520–21, 529, 547, 549, 551,
568, 628, 641, 646, 654, 659,
672, 681, 693, 697, 757, 764,
796, 805, 808, 813, 816, 830,
834, 848, 861, 888–89, 917,
935, 945, 961, 966–67, 996,
1012–13, 1024–25, 1034–35,
1037, 1051, 1068, 1076

Jeroboam II 495, 886

Jerome 490–91, 991

Jerusalem Personified 513, 515,
530, 752, 841, 907

Jesus 534, 583, 740, 754, 798–99,
835, 850–51, 907–908, 913,
934–35, 940, 973, 983–84,
1029, 1039, 1077–78

Jewish Tradition 490–91, 511,
601, 610, 645–46, 658, 697,
712, 761, 772, 805, 824, 991,
996, 1010, 1078

Jezreel 965

Joseph 537, 618, 639, 705, 722,
724, 806, 915–16, 918–19, 944,
1014

Josephus 490, 504, 732, 738,
809–10, 857, 925, 936

Joshua, Son of Jehozadak 773–74

Josiah 490, 493–94, 498, 512,
564, 568, 593, 605, 611, 652,

665, 697–98, 700, 711–12,
714–17, 719, 725–27, 731–32,
737, 739, 741, 764–65, 775,
880–81, 883, 951–52, 957

Jotham 493, 495, 511, 523, 527,
601, 727

Judah 490, 493–95, 497–504,
512–29, 531–32, 534, 536–37,
543–49, 556–57, 561–69,
571–72, 575–80, 585–86,
589–90, 592–95, 602, 604–607,
611, 616–20, 635, 637–39,
646–47, 650–63, 665–66,
675–76, 681–82, 686–90,
697–702, 704–708, 710–19,
721–27, 729–35, 737–44,
747–48, 750, 752, 754–55, 762,
765–66, 768, 772–74, 778, 783,
786, 795–96, 798, 809–11, 813,
815, 817–19, 821, 830–35,
840–42, 847, 855, 857, 866,
871–72, 879, 882, 889,
893–900, 903–907, 909–12,
915–21, 923–26, 929, 934–36,
940, 943–49, 953, 955, 960,
965, 973–78, 980, 993–94,
1003, 1005–1006, 1008,
1011–12, 1015, 1021, 1023,
1030, 1033–39, 1041–45, 1047,
1051, 1057, 1059, 1074–75

Judges 489, 491–92, 497, 504,
522–23, 532, 578, 736–37, 740,
921, 996, 1074, 1076

Judgment Oracle 526, 535, 731

Justice 497, 503, 517, 534,
537–38, 542, 545–48, 550–52,
570, 573–74, 578, 580–83,
608–09, 620, 637–38, 655, 658,
661–63, 673, 676–77, 688–89,
715, 724, 726–28, 741, 821,
826, 832, 834–35, 840, 842–43,
866, 873, 881, 889, 896, 901,
931, 967, 1001, 1004, 1015,
1048, 1058, 1063–64, 1066,
1075

K

Ketubim 492, 504, 996

L

Lachish 528–31

Lady Zion 515, 518, 522, 528–30,
554, 559–62, 565, 577–78,

585–88, 592–93, 596, 605,
613–19, 700, 703, 707–708,
710, 744–47, 750–53, 837, 839,
841–42, 855, 907, 909

Lament 535–36, 538, 593, 887,
922, 955

Lamp 827, 854, 857–58

Land 497–502, 514, 520–21,
525–28, 536, 538–39, 543, 545,
557, 562, 564, 572, 576–77,
579–80, 588–93, 612, 631–32,
651, 654–55, 662, 670, 675,
684, 687, 689, 700–701,
707–708, 717, 721, 723,
727–28, 731, 739–40, 746–47,
749–50, 752–54, 765–68,
776–77, 782–83, 791, 793, 798,
806, 810–11, 813, 816, 822,
839, 842, 849, 857, 865–66,
869–72, 877–83, 887, 889, 891,
893–95, 897–98, 903–12, 915,
917–18, 923–24, 926–27, 930,
932, 936–37, 940, 946, 950,
952, 960–61, 963, 965, 973–77,
983, 985, 993, 1001,
1003–1007, 1009, 1011, 1023,
1025, 1036, 1041, 1043–44,
1054, 1056–59, 1068, 1070,
1074

Latter Prophets 489, 498, 504,
681, 765, 772, 891, 996, 1044,
1068, 1074, 1076

Lawsuit 524, 571–72, 1036, 1050

Leaders 517, 522, 531–32, 539,
544–52, 578, 581, 604, 635,
637, 664–65, 676, 697, 719,
723, 726, 728, 736–37, 740–41,
763, 765–67, 771–72, 777–78,
780–82, 786, 797, 817, 821,
825, 839, 849, 851, 858–59,
866–67, 878, 880, 883, 891,
895, 916–17, 925, 927, 929–33,
941, 947, 952, 954–55, 965,
992, 1001–1002, 1029–30,
1041–42, 1044, 1072, 1074

Lebanon 612, 621, 673–74,
920–23

Leningrad Codex 490, 549, 568

Levi 618, 952–54, 959, 965, 994,
1023–27, 1031, 1051–52, 1064,
1070–71, 1073

Lightning 524, 910

Lion 565, 567, 625–26, 646–47,

761, 923, 984
 Lo-ammi 965
 Locust 500, 606–607, 631–35,
 653, 689, 791, 1001, 1054,
 1058
 Lo-ruhamah 965
 Love 534, 537, 546–47, 574,
 582–83, 587, 607, 647, 715,
 748, 752, 786, 818, 826, 851,
 897, 925–26, 963, 967, 994,
 1001, 1007, 1010–12, 1014–15,
 1034, 1058
 Loyalty 573, 630, 727, 900, 1041
 LXX Order 491–92, 505

M

Manasseh, King 493, 511, 564,
 577, 601, 605, 646, 681, 714,
 715–17, 719, 727, 810
 Mari 549, 963
 Megiddo 950–52
 Mercy 594, 651, 655, 659, 667,
 680–81, 688–89, 693, 757, 830,
 967, 984, 993, 1069
 Merism 893–94, 920, 945, 1026,
 1053
 Messenger Formula 521, 535, 545,
 614, 672, 774–76, 783, 789,
 824, 830, 845, 848, 881,
 889–90, 892–94, 896, 929–30
 Midian 684, 734
 Milcom 715–16
 Minor Prophets 489, 491, 496,
 507–508, 601, 627, 801, 844,
 987, 1079
 Miriam 572, 684
mišpāt 573–74
 Moab 572, 702, 732–33, 738,
 1068
 Molech 716
 Monotheism 1013
 Moon 638, 685, 715
 Moses 572, 596, 646, 668, 684,
 697, 704–705, 742, 782, 816,
 842, 850, 949, 954, 977–78,
 996, 1006, 1027, 1064,
 1067–70, 1076–78
 Mourning 527, 530, 708, 749,
 767, 821–22, 887–89, 897–98,

943, 950, 952–57, 959–60,
 1042

N

Nabateans 1011–12
 Name Theology 961–62
 Nathan 549, 952–54, 959
 Nebi'im 489–90, 504, 816,
 995–96, 998, 1006, 1067–68,
 1076
 Nebuchadnezzar 621, 674, 732,
 796, 847, 887
 New Wine 720, 777, 911
 Nimrod 564, 734–35, 744
 Nineveh 503–504, 514, 519, 522,
 579, 585–87, 593, 601–605,
 607–611, 613–20, 623–29,
 631–36, 638–39, 647, 652, 659,
 689, 697, 702, 729, 734–36,
 738, 899

O

Obedience 570, 573, 690–91,
 766–69, 779, 789, 792–93, 982,
 1003, 1005, 1058, 1064, 1079
 Offerings 548, 573, 743, 745, 779,
 965, 992, 994, 1006, 1008,
 1018–20, 1022, 1029, 1035,
 1037, 1039, 1042–43, 1047,
 1052, 1055–58, 1071, 1075
 Oil 500–501, 665, 687, 731, 740,
 777, 854, 857–58, 860, 965,
 1025
 Olive Tree 500, 792, 857–58
 Omri 513, 517, 576–77, 580
 On that Day Formula 719,
 948–50, 959–60, 975–76, 978
 Oracles against the Nations
 699–701, 706, 711, 720–23,
 729, 905
 Orphan 889, 1072

P

Parallelism 565, 720, 746, 905,
 907–908, 919, 1010, 1026
 Paran 682, 684, 691
 Paul 504–505, 507, 533, 542,
 596–97, 601, 618, 640–41, 665,
 670, 755, 757, 792, 794, 802,
 819, 840, 850, 914, 941, 957,

968, 984, 1077

Peace 517–20, 522, 547, 550, 552,
 554–55, 557–59, 561, 563–64,
 575–76, 595, 616–17, 672, 677,
 784–85, 811, 817–18, 821, 830,
 835, 849, 892, 897–98, 901,
 905–908, 912, 940, 956, 967,
 977–78, 1017, 1025–26
 Persian Period 495, 497–99,
 512–13, 516, 586, 645, 647–49,
 651, 655, 705, 738, 754, 764,
 801, 807, 815, 818, 857, 886,
 908, 912, 925, 948, 953–54,
 960, 979, 1001, 1023, 1026,
 1042, 1045, 1055–56, 1063,
 1074
 Pharisees 851
 Philistia 531, 593, 702, 730–31,
 738, 904–906, 910
 Philistines 701, 708, 729–32, 734,
 747, 841
 Phoenician 529, 715–16, 905, 934
 Prayer 522, 585, 589–91, 607,
 617, 651, 656, 679–81, 687,
 689, 697, 794, 842, 1014, 1035,
 1037
 Prediction 547, 587, 779, 796–97,
 859, 884, 888, 908
 Pride 625, 629, 866, 905–906
 Priests 502, 517, 522, 545, 548,
 550, 562, 607, 667, 681, 700,
 714, 719, 727, 736–37, 740,
 765–66, 779, 783, 786, 789,
 806, 811, 824, 847–48, 850,
 884, 886–88, 899, 925, 935,
 953–54, 966, 992, 995, 997–98,
 1003–1007, 1009, 1015,
 1017–31, 1033–34, 1037, 1039,
 1044–45, 1047, 1049, 1052,
 1055–57, 1073–74
 Promises 500–501, 514, 516–19,
 529, 540, 555, 558, 562, 569,
 580, 591–92, 594, 613, 703,
 706–707, 709, 740, 745–46,
 748–49, 752–54, 768, 775,
 783–85, 798, 812, 817, 830–31,
 837, 841, 848–49, 858, 891–93,
 896, 909, 911–13, 918–19, 926,
 976, 983, 1020, 1040–41, 1043,
 1056, 1058
 Prophet(s) 489–491, 490, 493,
 495, 496–98, 500, 502–503,

504, 507–508, 511–12, 515,
516–17, 520, 521–23, 527–29,
532, 534, 535–53, 555, 556–57,
560, 562, 568–69, 571, 573,
576–81, 583, 586–87, 590, 594,
597, 601, 607, 610, 627,
639–41, 645–47, 649–52,
654–70, 675–77, 678, 680–81,
686–89, 690, 691, 693, 697–98,
700–701, 705, 709, 712, 713,
714–15, 717, 726–28, 736–38,
739, 740–41, 751, 761, 763–68,
771–72, 774–81, 783–85,
789–90, 793–98, 801, 805–806,
807, 810, 811–12, 815–16, 818,
820, 822, 823–27, 830–33, 835,
837–38, 842–43, 844, 845,
847–48, 851, 853–60, 863, 865,
869, 871, 875, 879–84, 886–89,
891, 892–93, 894, 897–901,
908, 913, 914, 920, 924, 927,
929, 930–40, 950, 953, 959–64,
966–68, 974, 976, 987, 991–92,
995–96, 998, 1001–1002, 1003,
1006–1007, 1010, 1015, 1018,
1020–23, 1025, 1027, 1029–31,
1034, 1036, 1042–44, 1047–48,
1050–51, 1053, 1055–57,
1060–61, 1066–68, 1069,
1070–71, 1074–79

Prophetic Prediction 796–97, 884

Prostitutes, Prostitution 515, 527,
626, 627, 629, 636, 752, 850,
851, 891, 1039, 1041

Protest Literature 664–65

Providence 619, 912, 1015

Punishment 497–98, 501–502,
513, 516–18, 525, 531–32, 537,
539, 547–48, 559–60, 563,
565–69, 571, 575–76, 578–80,
586, 591–93, 595, 602,
604–607, 621, 626–27, 639,
650, 652–55, 659, 661, 663,
667, 669–70, 673, 675–76, 681,
687–90, 708, 715–16, 721–23,
731–33, 737–38, 744, 746,
748–50, 766, 775, 777, 790,
793, 798, 817, 831–34, 837,
839–41, 844, 860, 864–65,
890–91, 900, 904, 917, 931,
933, 937–38, 950, 960, 964–65,
980, 984, 1004, 1013, 1015,
1039, 1042–43, 1048, 1059,
1065, 1074

Q

Qumran 505, 633, 680, 798, 864

R

Rahab 850

Redaction 513, 601, 801, 904,
998, 1031

Remnant 515–16, 518–19, 522,
535, 537, 540–41, 543, 554–55,
565, 567–69, 611, 655, 675,
686, 699–700, 702–703,
706–708, 710, 714, 721, 724,
726–28, 731, 733, 746–48,
750–51, 753, 777, 781, 817,
822, 893, 895, 899–900, 959,
964–66, 979–80, 982, 992,
1005, 1035, 1037–38, 1063,
1066, 1070

Repent 500–03, 681, 687, 738,
824–26, 895, 899–900, 955,
968, 1001, 1006, 1042, 1054,
1056, 1058–61

Repentance 495, 500–502, 504,
601, 617, 687, 738, 793, 811,
816, 821, 823–26, 831–32, 890,
959, 1004, 1040, 1053–54,
1056, 1072

Restoration 494, 498, 500–502,
513, 516, 518–20, 537, 557–58,
560, 570, 586, 618, 687, 700,
703–704, 706–11, 714, 721,
731, 739, 743–44, 748–50, 753,
798, 807, 812, 830, 832, 835,
839, 841, 843, 848, 860, 893,
906, 909, 915–18, 921, 923–24,
927, 929, 945, 960, 962,
970–71, 975, 1069

Revelation 522, 548, 596, 886,
944, 951

rib 524, 571–72, 1036, 1050

Righteousness 503, 518, 542, 668,
670, 688, 690–91, 724, 726–28,
741, 767, 821, 873, 881,
893–94, 965, 967, 994, 1052,
1058, 1060, 1063, 1066

Rulers 517, 522, 545, 548, 551,
554, 562–64, 737, 796, 809,
882

S

Sacrifice 548, 573, 581, 716,

718–19, 786, 790, 805, 833,
842, 886, 898, 900, 960, 981,
1018–22, 1025, 1028–31, 1037,
1049, 1051–53

Salvation 515, 543, 574, 578–80,
583, 616, 670, 689, 697, 699,
783, 821, 899–900, 967, 1006,
1066

Samaria 499, 501, 512, 516,
522–27, 530–32, 534, 536, 546,
549, 567, 577, 593, 605, 653,
722, 809, 919, 924–25, 935–36,
1044

Satan 845–46

Saul 528, 530, 562, 697

Scribal Prophecy 538

Second Temple 681, 755, 762,
767, 806, 819, 859–60, 954,
1029, 1051

Sennacherib 498, 511–12, 514,
524, 527–30, 561, 576, 580,
586, 588, 593–94, 609, 646,
730, 742, 765

Septuagint 491, 505, 532, 646,
1036

Seventy Years 727, 786, 824,
830–31, 861, 887–89, 895, 898

Shalmaneser III 784, 1067

Shepherd 518, 550, 562, 564, 589,
747, 814, 819, 911, 915, 917,
919, 930–34, 936–41, 963–65,
968

Sidon 732, 810, 905

Sin 517, 525, 533, 546, 548,
573–75, 627, 691, 847, 891,
960, 978, 1064

Slavery 572–73, 576, 580, 587,
589, 932

Slaves 841, 1014

Sodom 697, 733, 742

Solomon 681, 716, 727, 761, 842,
875, 973, 993

Sovereignty 973, 1058

Spirit 548, 551, 582, 681, 740,
783, 822, 855, 877–78, 955,
960–61, 966, 1037–38, 1076

Spirit of God 1038

Suffering 533, 542, 549–50, 552,
575, 620, 637, 676, 686–87,
832, 1004, 1058

Sun 634, 683–84, 715, 849, 893, 1035, 1066–67, 1077

Superscription(s) 491, 493, 494, 495, 522, 523, 527, 601, 602, 608, 609, 614, 645, 648, 649, 652, 656, 658, 679, 680, 681, 682, 697, 700, 709, 711, 712, 713, 714, 725, 764, 773, 781, 813, 814, 822, 825, 840, 904, 929, 944, 945, 974, 994, 997, 998, 1009, 1010

Symbolic Act 527, 929–30, 933, 935, 937, 939

Syncretism 1035, 1041, 1044

Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches 496–97, 555, 660, 714

Syria 683, 810, 877, 903–905, 952, 979

Syro-Ephraimite War 593

T

Tanak 995–96

Teman 682, 877, 910

Temple 494–95, 498, 501, 532, 548, 567–68, 575, 579, 581, 645, 647, 649, 654, 667, 674, 681–82, 686, 688, 697–98, 703, 705–707, 709, 717, 719–21, 725, 748–49, 754–55, 761–69, 771, 775–86, 790–93, 801–802, 805–806, 808, 810–11, 815, 817, 819, 825, 830–31, 833, 838–43, 849–50, 855–56, 858–61, 864–66, 870–72, 875, 877–83, 887–88, 891–96, 898, 900, 906, 925, 935–36, 954, 960, 962, 974–76, 980–81, 991–92, 1003, 1018–22, 1024–25, 1029, 1031, 1034–36, 1040–41, 1048, 1050–51, 1053–54, 1057

Temple Reconstruction 707, 762, 765, 768, 775, 778, 805–806, 839–40, 843, 858, 861, 888, 891, 893, 898

Teraphim 916

Theodicy 499, 502–503, 508, 611, 646, 649, 651, 654, 657, 666, 688, 690, 776, 1000, 1003–1004, 1008, 1059–60, 1063, 1065

Theophany 524–26, 534, 572, 602–606, 608–10, 612, 637, 639, 645, 647, 651, 654–56, 679–86, 717, 783, 972–74, 1013

Tigris River 735

Tobijah 880–81

tôrâ 557, 655, 658, 662, 664, 736, 789, 1026–1027

Tradents 569, 798, 926

Tradition 489–91, 511, 524, 532, 549, 557, 559, 588, 596, 601, 610, 625, 628, 645–46, 651, 658, 663, 681–82, 684, 697, 705, 712, 718, 731, 733, 735, 738, 755, 761, 764, 772, 774, 776, 782, 801–802, 805–806, 818, 824, 877, 883, 889, 892, 912, 921, 925, 951, 962, 991, 996, 1010, 1012, 1025, 1027, 1032, 1052, 1068, 1078

Transjordan 921

Twelve Prophets 489–91, 508, 536, 538, 540, 597, 641, 646, 669, 675, 678, 693, 790, 820, 851, 865, 883–84, 901, 914, 987

Tyre 732, 810, 833, 905, 909, 979

U

Uzziah 493, 726–27, 973–74

V

Vine 500–501, 687, 792, 849, 895, 1056

Violence 515, 517, 539, 543, 548, 574–75, 577, 579–80, 582, 594, 620–21, 629, 636–38, 654, 658, 665, 670, 674–77, 689, 691, 719, 728, 736, 817–18, 913, 956, 1015, 1042, 1055

Virgin 908

Vision 498, 502, 548, 557, 579–80, 609, 645, 649–51, 655–56, 666–69, 672, 675, 688–89, 717, 738, 750, 754, 774, 806–807, 811–12, 816–17, 827–35, 837–45, 849, 851, 853–61, 863–66, 869–72, 875–79, 882, 886, 890–91, 893, 897, 918, 926, 956, 962, 974,

976, 980–81, 991, 1031

Vows 515, 578, 616–17, 619, 1039

Vulgate 490

W

War 517, 530, 540, 547, 556–57, 576, 593, 595, 665, 677, 697, 741, 785, 818, 835, 892, 921, 956–57, 966–67, 971, 977–78, 981

Warnings 523, 531–33, 594, 717, 737, 900, 966, 1043, 1071, 1074

Water 588, 735, 775, 790–91, 973–75, 980, 983, 1004, 1058–59

Weapons 628, 683, 685

Wine 500–501, 539, 668, 687, 720–21, 777, 790, 849, 911, 915, 919, 965, 1025

Wisdom 508, 556, 563, 611, 656, 662–63, 668–69, 776, 799, 984, 1026

Wisdom Tradition 776

Woe Oracle 535, 603, 608, 627–28, 639, 650–51, 670–74, 729, 731, 736

Word of God 522, 596, 940, 1075

Wrath 524, 526, 529, 532–33, 579, 608–13, 637–38, 651, 655, 673, 681, 690, 693, 715, 722–24, 727–28, 738, 757, 889–91, 984, 1043, 1068, 1071–72

Writing 492, 495, 519, 521, 568, 601, 605–607, 613, 639, 645, 649, 658, 662, 675–76, 698, 707, 709, 712, 725, 739, 743, 750, 755, 765, 775, 844, 992, 997, 999, 1001, 1003, 1062, 1064

Y

Yam 685

YHWH as Husband 614

YHWH as Judge 845

YHWH as Shepherd 919

YHWH as Warrior 748, 971

Z

Zaphon 877

Zerubbabel 761–63, 765, 768,
772–74, 777, 779, 781, 795–98,
801–802, 806, 812, 824, 840,
848–49, 853–56, 858–59,
879–84, 912, 949, 953, 957,
992

Zion 503, 515–20, 522, 528–30,
546, 548–49, 554–56, 558–63,
565, 568–70, 576–78, 585–88,
592–93, 596, 605, 613–19, 639,
653, 675, 682, 700, 703,
707–10, 725, 744–53, 764, 821,
830, 837, 839–43, 855, 879,
890–92, 907–909

Zion Tradition 682, 892

